

Poems from Guantánamo: Writing as an Everyday Practice of Resistance

Written by Yesa Portela Ormond

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YESA PORTELA ORMOND, NOV 6 2023

Every time we try to make sense of contemporary framings of international politics, one of the first things that may come to mind is that so much is going on, all at once. How, then, should we think, write, and talk about these many things that feel unprecedented but also oddly familiar? (Walker et al. 2018). Where should we look first? How should we differentiate what counts as good political judgment and what represents attempts to reify the same old stories that we have been told over the years? Certainly, this is not an easy task, for we are surrounded by powerful interests and their political demands, by dominant epistemologies that try to reinforce the idea of an inevitable continuity of tragic games between states, and by frames that limit and, at the same time, establish patterns of authoritative forms of knowledge. Our imagination seems, then, to be constrained (see Walker 1993; 2017; 2018; Butler 2018).

Discourses on war and violence are significant for international relations (Newman 2004), and they are, for instance, and for the most part, dominated by a state-centric orientation. Numerous studies on “the War on Terror”, for example, tend to focus on narratives concerning a “war between the USA and the Axis of Evil” (Bijos 2009; Blix 2004), a “geopolitical war interested on natural resources and strategic positions” (Lopes 2009) a “cultural war between the civilized West and the barbaric East” (Laipson 2003; Lewis 2003), and so forth. Closed, state-centric and strategic boundaries seem to keep being (re)constructed and seem to try to legitimize their authority. Nonetheless, during the last decades, many authors tried to enrich the ways we make sense of international politics (Ashley 1989; Campbell 1998; Owens 2010; Walker 1993; Vaughan-Williams 2009; Wilcox 2015; Zehfuss 2003 2019 – to name, inadequately, only a few of them). Shapiro (1997, 31), for example, shows us that “rather than naturalizing spaces of enactment by focusing on the actions by which boundaries are policed, defended, and transgressed – the familiar focus of war and security studies [...]”, it is possible to acknowledge practices which construct identity and space and to pay attention to the ways through which “[...] self-alterity relationships are historically framed and played out.”

In recent years, my scholarly focus has been directed towards the examination of the prevailing discursive performances post-9/11 – National Security Strategies, Executive Orders, State of the Union Addresses, etc. –, which served to legitimize various practices, including the detention and torture of individuals categorized as “terrorists” – in places like Guantánamo, Bagram, and Abu Ghraib – in the name of a “greater good.” This ostensibly “higher purpose” was framed in terms of safeguarding and promoting core values like “democracy, justice, humanity, and freedom.”

Taking a somewhat divergent path, this article endeavors to explore the realm of practices of resistance. In this context, I seek to delve into the manifestations of resistance enacted by the detainees who have been (or continue to be) held at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp since 2002. My examination revolves around the poems composed by these detainees. Consequently, my intention is to contemplate the act of writing as a facet of resistance within the daily routines of these individuals. In this sense, it is imperative to emphasize that my aim is to shed light on a specific category of “everyday practices of resistance” that may not directly (or entirely) belong to our own every/day.

It is also important to say that when I mention “everyday practices of resistance” here, I mean sometimes individual, sometimes collective, uncoordinated, fragmented, and informal practices (Scott 1985) of resisting unequal and

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violent relations of power. Neither are these practices of resistance part of the everyday of the city, as De Certeau (1988) explore, nor are they part of our encounters in the city, as Closs Stephens (2013) analyze.

Rather, they are related to Guantánamo, a “[...] place that occupies a *strange place* in American jurisprudence [...] the equivalent of *outer space* [...] considered *extraterritorial* to the many of the laws of the United States.” (Thomas 2019, my emphasis). Also, drawing from the terminologies employed by Butler and Spivak (2007, 25), they are related to individuals who were rendered as “spectral humans, deprived of ontological weight and failing the tests of social intelligibility required for minimal recognition”.

Certainly, a quick search on the internet can reveal disturbing images, reports and testimonies of detainees being hurt, humiliated, and tortured in prisons like Guantánamo Bay, in Cuba. There, detainees are / were held without charge, deprived of access to legal counsel, and cut off from communication with their families, perpetuating an endless cycle of abuses (Human Rights Watch 2002; Amnesty International, 2023).

That site is directly linked to the post-9/11 context, in which a so-called “Global War on Terror” (GWOt) was established by the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009). Definitely, the GWOt’s discourses and practices extended beyond the Bush administration. This is evident in the case of the Guantánamo Bay detention center, which became a lingering issue for President Barack Obama (2009-2017) as he took office in January 2009. The facility’s operational legacy left by the previous administration included a deeply tarnished reputation due to scandals involving detainee torture and humiliation.

It is noteworthy that despite the promises made during the election campaign and the early days of the Obama administration to close Guantánamo within a year (Executive Order 13492 2009; Jackson 2011), the detention center remained open and fully operational eight years later, at the end of President Obama’s second term. Painful memories of the practices that occurred within its walls continued to haunt public consciousness (Pitter 2016; Amnesty International 2017).

In addition to casting a shadow over Obama’s legacy, this situation created an opportunity for Donald Trump (2017-2020) to further exacerbate matters. During his 2018 “State of the Union Address”, President Trump highlighted his decision to issue Executive Order 13823, instructing then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis to conduct a comprehensive review of the United States’ military detention policies, ultimately reaffirming the operation of the Guantánamo Bay facility. Consequently, Executive Order 13823 rescinded Executive Order 13492, asserting that the operations at Guantánamo Bay were deemed not only “lawful, secure, and humane”, but also aligning with both U.S. domestic laws and international legal standards.

As of 2023, during Joseph Biden’s administration (2021-present), which had promised to usher in a new era with slogans like “Our Best Days Still Lie Ahead”, “Battle for the Soul of the Nation”, “Build Back Better” and “Unite for a Better America” (Biden 2020), the troubling reality persists. Guantánamo Bay remains in operation, detaining individuals indefinitely. In September 2023, the facility still holds 30 detainees, while 750 have been relocated elsewhere (The New York Times 2023). Despite the fervent efforts of over 160 international human rights organizations, who collectively voiced their concerns in a letter advocating for the closure of the detention center and condemning its persistent violations, which include torture and the denial of fair trials, the situation remains unchanged (Harb 2023).

It is clear, therefore, that it did not matter whether the methods employed against “terrorists” would have any effect on combating “terror.” Their guilt being proven held little significance, as their lives and bodies had become utterly unrecognizable – bare, precarious lives (Agamben 1998; Butler 2004) whose qualities were destroyed – or never even considered as existent. For policies established and maintained during the last 22 years in the USA led some to believe that there is not a human being in a “terrorist”. On the contrary, perhaps only an object-individual, or. Worse, an *object* (Devetak 2005) to be punished in response to the evils done to the Americans and to the “free, democratic, just, and human” world.

Guantánamo employs techniques rhetorically defined as “improved interrogation techniques”. Legally, however,

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these very techniques – force-feeding, sexual constraints, endless interrogations – fit the definition of torture (Wilcox 2015, 49; Convention Against Torture 1984; Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War 1949). Thus, even though the Convention Against Torture (1984) guaranteed, in its Article 2, that at “No exceptional circumstances whatsoever [...] may be invoked as a justification of torture”, there are numerous complaints concerning the use of violence inflicted on the detainees in the name of “inter/national security”.

In his memoir, “*Guantánamo Diaries*”, Mohamedou Slahi (2015) vividly recounts the abrupt and coercive manner in which he was removed from his homeland, Mauritania, and placed under the custody of the USA. His routine as a detainee was marked by an unrelenting cycle of violent interrogations, where a regimen of sleep, food and water deprivation, and the constant presence of anxiety and pain became his everyday life.

Guantánamo witnessed the imposition of sexual constraints. Through torture, the detainee’s body was subjected to the construction of a fragile and repressed “sexual identity,” thereby forcibly instilling a sense of “Muslim deviant sexuality” (Owens, 2010; Gourevitch and Morris, 2008). In a sense, faceless “enemies” without territory (“terrorism” and “terrorists”) became (territorializable and identifiable) corporeal targets of the American government.

Like Mohammedou Slahi, who wrote his memoir while detained, some of these detainees survived torture, somehow resisted and have shared their histories through books and poems. In *poems from Guantánamo*, a book published in 2007, we can read 22 poems declassified by the US Department of Defense (DoD) and organized by Marc Falkoff, volunteer lawyers, and translators. These poems were written “inside the wire” by detainees “imprisoned without charge, trial, or the most fundamental protections of the Geneva Conventions” with little or no expectation of reaching an external audience – especially because the DoD saw them (and the many other poems that have been not cleared for the public) as potential “national security threats” (Falkoff 2007, 1).

How could tortured bodies articulate these poems? I honestly do not know. But as Butler (2018) says, the way their words were/are formed and used seems to be linked to a capacity of surviving. Many of the detainees kept writing poetry to preserve their sanity, to immortalize the memories of their suffering and, also, to defend and to preserve their humanity (Falkoff 2007).

In truth, it is something of a miracle that the collection—or the poetry that comprises it— even exists. The psychic toll that Guantánamo has taken on the detainees is unfathomable. They remain entirely isolated from the rest of the world, kept ignorant of all current events. It is difficult to see how hope can flourish in such an environment [...] (Falkoff 2007, 2).

These detainees followed the footsteps of other prisoners and other times, like those who wrote in the Gulag, in Nazi concentration camps, and those like Gramsci, in Italy, or like Sayyid Qutb, in Egypt. In so doing, they faced many obstacles not only in the process of publishing the poems, but, before, in the process of composing and registering them. In their first year of detention, detainees were not allowed to use pen and paper. However, this obstacle did not stop them from writing and sharing their thoughts, for in the lack of writing instruments, they wrote their poems on cups using tooth paste or little pebbles, and passed the “cup poems” from cell to cell (Falkoff 2007, 3; Miller 2007).

Some poems address detention experiences such as anger, pain, and humiliations they have suffered. Other poems share a sense of betrayal and disbelief towards the American Government (Falkoff, 2007). In a sense, however, all of them try to remind us of the humanity of each detainee who have been treated as something other than human, as a “terrorist”, a villain, an evildoer... (Butler, 2018).

Shaker Abdurraheem Aamer, a Saudi Arabian, detained in 2002 and released in 2015, wonders (apud Falkoff 2007, 20):

[...] I see them talking, arguing, fighting—
What kind of peace are they looking for?
Why do they kill? What are they planning? [...]

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Sami al Haj, a Sudanese journalist taken into custody in 2001, tortured in Bagram, Kandahar and Guantánamo, wrote (42-43):

[...] They have monuments to liberty
And freedom of opinion, which is well and good.

But I explained to them that
Architecture is not justice.

America, you ride on the backs of orphans,
And terrorize them daily. [...]

And Jumah al Dossari, a Bahraini detained in 2003, asks those who read his “Death Poem” (32):

Take my blood.
Take my death shroud and
The remnants of my body.
Take photographs of my corpse at the grave, lonely.

Send them to the world,
To the judges and
To the people of conscience,
Send them to the principled men and the fair-minded.

And let them bear the guilty burden, before the world,
Of this innocent soul. [...]”

It is possible to agree with Butler (2018) when she says that these poems powerfully open a way through dominant ideologies that have long been trying to rationalize war as a means to peace. Writing and sharing these poems certainly disturb and expose the words of those who torture in the name of “freedom, equality, justice, democracy, humanity, and so forth”. This way, these poems represent an incendiary risk not only to a so-called “national security”, but also to dominant discourses (Butler, 2018).

The poems shared here may speak to each of us differently and it is not my place to try to explain each one of their lines, cadences, and individual purposes. Certainly, they do not represent a complete portrait of what happened and of what was written at Guantánamo. However, in a sense, we could see in these poems a way of resisting and surviving (even if provisionally).

It is imperative to underscore that when I allude to “resistance,” it is not a simplistic recourse to a readily discernible opposition to domination. Nor do I engage in a binary dichotomy of “collective resistance” versus “hidden agency,” in which detainees’ writings would be relegated to the category of “hidden resistance.” Conversely, aligned with Lilja (2022), I conceive of “resistance” as an overarching concept, whose nomenclature is contested, and whose manifestations are intricately interconnected.

This implies that resistance encompasses a spectrum of forms that are in constant negotiation and mutual constitution, be they serial, organized, or individual. In the context of the poems of Guantánamo, resistance emerges as a persistent, “day-in and day out [that] rarely makes headlines” (Scott 1989, 49). It represents a form of resistance that may have initially begun as a solitary mode of articulating feelings of pain, doubt, sorrow, hopelessness, or even hope. However, over time, this expression was disseminated, reiterated, and eventually transformed into a literary work that poignantly encapsulated these emotional states.

Even if the detainees found themselves suffocated through torture, they also found a way to keep breathing and to keep their memories and experiences alive. These writings outlived – either figuratively or literally – their authors.

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They resisted. By being shared from cell to cell and from their cells to a book that can be read by us, the poems written by Guantánamo's detainees also show a sense of solidarity. They show us that lives are connected, no matter **where** "we" are and no matter **when** "we" are. This may seem like an everyday practice of resistance that is not ours, but that talks to us and shakes our (un)certainities.

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