

INTRODUCTION

BORDERLANDS

To the iguanas, especially to Princess, cats, banana rats, hummingbirds, our dear friend the sea, and even the pesky, noisy woodpeckers: I wish to thank you for your companionship and for bringing light into our lives in such a dark place as Guantánamo

**Mansoor Adayfi, *Don't Forget Us Here:
Lost and Found at Guantánamo***

It's impossible to write about The Base
Without comparing yourself to its victims

José Ramón Sánchez, "Los quilos"

Iguanas, cats, banana rats, hummingbirds, the sea, and woodpeckers. That Yemeni writer Mansoor Adayfi, who was held without charge for fourteen years at the American military prison at Guantánamo Bay, should close his memoir by extending thanks to these companions comes as a surprise. Adayfi was, after all, held at one of the most notorious detention sites of the twenty-first century, a site whose legal contortions and human rights abuses have outraged advocates, activists and scholars since the US government's hurried and clandestine opening of detention camps at its naval base in eastern Cuba in January 2002. It is a site, moreover, where the Cuban government has vigorously protested what it considers to be the United States' illegal occupation of the territory, enabled by a lease in perpetuity granted through the unequal negotiations of the Cuban-American Treaty of Relations in 1903, and where a heavily guarded and land-mined fence line prohibits passage between Cuba and the base. And yet, in acknowledging the comfort he drew from the presence of creatures who know no borders, and from "our dear friend" (366) the Caribbean Sea that marks a limit to the base just as it surrounds the island of Cuba, Adayfi acknowledges an alterna-

tive Guantánamo, of sympathies, solidarities, and sharing of both space and experience. José Ramón Sánchez, a poet living near the base in the Cuban city of Guantánamo, weaves similar sympathies into his more than one hundred poems about the base, the long shadow it has cast over the region's history, and the impossibility of seeing it firsthand, as well as the solitudes that bind Cubans to men detained at the base even as their lives are vastly different. As Sánchez writes in "Impossible," the project of the poet moved by sympathy but restrained by politics becomes to "write second-hand poetry," to "take the words of others, images others saw for me" (*Black Arrow* 21).

For the past two decades, Guantánamo has been a battleground for two deeply consequential, if partially metaphorical, wars. One is Cuba's long-entrenched so-called war on imperialism that, since the early 1960s, has underpinned the David versus Goliath metaphor of the country's relations with the United States, and has justified decades of militarized social programs and defensive measures in the name of revolution. The other—more immediately recognizable for its relation to Guantánamo—is the President George W. Bush-era war on terror, whose divisions and detritus linger stubbornly into the present day. Nevertheless, despite the endurance of both wars and the centrality of Guantánamo Bay Naval Base to each of them, they are not Guantánamo's only story, nor are they the focus of this book. Instead, *A New No-Man's-Land* traces a Guantánamo that persists despite the enmities that have engulfed it: Guantánamo as a literary and artistic region, as a natural environment, and as a human experience, where the force of multiple hostilities on contested ground is met by articulations of survival, solidarity, and care.

The forty-five square miles of Naval Station Guantánamo Bay, as the leased territory known as GITMO is officially named, have since 2002 been inhabited by populations of vastly distinct experiences, housed in close proximity to one another: detainees originally from over thirty countries primarily in Europe and the Middle East, often captured in Afghanistan or Pakistan; military personnel and military families from the United States; contract workers from Caribbean countries, particularly Jamaica, as well as from the Philippines; and, in the shorter term, lawyers and journalists from across the globe. Cubans reside at the base, as workers who chose to stay after diplomatic relations with the United States ended in 1961, and as refugees who have crossed the mined and surveilled Guantánamo Bay to seek asylum. Many more Cubans live

with the base as they inhabit a broader Guantánamo, particularly the border towns of Caimanera and Boquerón, once economically connected to the base, but now restricted zones secured by the Cuban military. Acknowledging these experiences and the differences among and within them, this book approaches Guantánamo as both the naval base and its geographic extensions into Cuban territory, and as a borderland region whose inhabitants often have in common limited access to power and self-representation, mobility restricted by geography if not captivity, and immersion in political languages that have ascribed rigid roles as “enemy combatant” or “patriot,” “revolutionary” or “dissident.” This is, moreover, a borderland region that, while physically isolated in its locale at the eastern edge of Cuba, extends a network of familial, linguistic, and cultural connections into the Caribbean and—given the multiple colonial and imperial histories that converge in the region—across much of the world.

The Guantánamo base is as notorious for its *sui generis* legal status as for its *de facto* territorial separation: initially presented by the Bush government’s lawyers as beyond the reach of the US Constitution, and cut off from Cuba and otherwise reachable only by military-operated air and sea transport, it met former secretary of state Donald Rumsfeld’s reported criterion of “the legal equivalent of outer space.”¹ Cuba’s Guantánamo province, while deeply tied to the base and its labor economy until the 1960s, has since then lived only the aftereffects of the former relationship, its border towns in particular designated as high-security zones with restricted access from elsewhere in Cuba. At the same time, even as its economic and institutional entities are part of tightly structured national networks, its six-hundred-mile distance from the economic and cultural metropolis of Havana has bequeathed it its own form of isolation. To read these two Guantánamos as one—which is the project of this book, and its referent when it names “Guantánamo” as a borderland region, rather than either the base, the province, or the provincial capital Guantánamo City—is to trace connections and affinities in the face of both complete physical separation and vast asymmetries.

Asymmetries are simultaneously the steepest challenge and the source of deepest texture to mapping Guantánamo as a borderland region, just as they often are to comparative work writ large.² I regard as asymmetrical those relationships that take shape in this region—across the fence line dividing the base from Cuba, and within the base and the

detention camps themselves—which are marked far less by their minimal similarities than by their vast differences, differences marked as much by scale as by content alone. This understanding of asymmetry draws initially, ironically—and, indeed, with horror—on the term *asymmetric warfare*, common in the field of international relations. Steven D. Smith has summarized the term, with reference to scholarly and military sources, as “any warfare where the opposing combatants are at opposite ends of a political or tactical spectrum of unequal abilities or means to engage on equal footing”; specifically, where combatants are “unequal in military power, politics, population or technology” (2). While the tactics of *asymmetric warfare*, and related terms such as *guerilla warfare* and *irregular warfare*, have long histories, the recent use of this particular term coincides with the post-9/11 conflict and the centrality to it of non-state actors, among them, ostensibly, Guantánamo’s so-called unlawful enemy combatants. And yet the most localized use of this term in relation to Guantánamo is also its most chilling: in response to the suicides of three detainees in June 2006, Rear Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., then commander of Joint Task Force Guantánamo, is reported to have said: “I believe this was not an act of desperation, but an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us.”³

International relations scholars, notably Christine Sylvester, have brought to the fore the human dimensions of “asymmetrical warfare,” observing that the nonconventional subject positions from which it is waged bring with them a host of experiences unacknowledged in this and other kinds of warfare (1). The asymmetrical relationships that this book explores, however, align most closely with what Lisa Lowe has read as “intimacies” across four continents. Lowe’s “intimacies” are relations forged in the aftermaths of colonial projects, rarely involving geographic closeness but aligning experiences that are necessarily particular in their local details; they must be traced across distinct archives to discern their “constellation of asymmetrical and unevenly legible intimacies” (18). Guantánamo’s compassionate asymmetries approximate, too, the late nineteenth-century anticolonial friendships, “minor narratives of cross-cultural collaboration between oppressors and oppressed,” which Leela Gandhi approaches as “innovative border crossing, visible in small, defiant flights from the fetters of belonging toward the unknown destinations of radical alterity” (6–7). At the same time, the peculiarities and constraints of the Guantánamo borderland region, in particular

the spatial organization of its detention camps and the impassibility of the fence line, produce variations on “intimacy” and “friendship.” Some, like relationships between guards and cellmates, are born of a stiflingly close physical proximity, while others, like those between Cubans and detainees, are rooted in the absolute impossibility of communication.

Asymmetries in the archive of texts and art that maps the Guantánamo borderland region are multiple. While not all have as their axis the fence line between Cuba and the base, some of the most prominent are inevitably governed by the stark differences between writing as a citizen of a deeply regulated and invigilated late socialist state, with an established if highly prescriptive and underresourced infrastructure of cultural institutions, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a temporary and often involuntary resident of a US-controlled territory, chosen precisely for its precarious relationship to the US Constitution but conscripted into a dubious program of patriotic defense.

A first asymmetry in the archive of what I am calling the Guantánamo region is one of scale. In short, and perhaps surprisingly, the corpus of Cuban creative work contributing to a borderland reading of Guantánamo is scant in comparison to such work produced on the base itself, notwithstanding the far smaller and more transient population of the latter. Despite its enduring presence in Guantánamo Province, Cubans have no access to the base, very little information about its operations, and few incentives to discuss it publicly or draw it into the sphere of national culture. In the post-9/11 period, Cuban state media published little on the plight of detainees at Guantánamo, even as major newspapers in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East reported consistently on the legal issues and human rights questions emerging from operations at the detention centers at the base. While the Cuban national film industry has on occasion, over the six decades since its institutionalization, referenced the base directly and indirectly—notably in José Massip’s *Guantánamo* (1965) and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s *Guantánamera* (1995)—as have some nationally prominent literary figures, the topic has largely been left to a small number of writers, artists, and filmmakers in Guantánamo Province. It is these who, in poetry, short fiction, art, and film, articulate peculiarly local engagements with the base’s presence, and with the local histories of fraught neighborliness and clandestine migration that this presence has generated.

Related to the asymmetrical scale of the corpus of work from each

side of the Guantánamo fence line is a similar asymmetry in the visibility and accessibility of each corpus. Despite the chaotic and extrajudicial nature of its founding, the purportedly clandestine imperative of its operations and the no doubt remaining “known unknowns” surrounding these, Joint Task Force Guantánamo has at various points in its existence been surprisingly, and perhaps paradoxically, solicitous in its claims to transparency. As Rebecca A. Adelman observes in a 2013 article, Joint Task Force Guantánamo has published photographs of its facilities, offered admittedly pre-scripted press tours, and maintained its own relatively robust internet presence through a website whose home page announces the commitment to “safe, humane and legal detention operations” (Adelman, “Safe, Humane”). These heavily curated gestures at rendering detention operations visible have been abundantly supplemented by the thousands of pages of military and legal documentation—some unclassified and some released as part of unauthorized WikiLeaks “document dumps”—as well as by testimonies, lists, and summaries collated by such vitally important advocacy efforts as those of Witness to Guantánamo; the Guantánamo Testimonials Project at the Center for Study of Human Rights in the Americas at the University of California, Davis; Healing and Recovery After Trauma; the *New York Times*’ “Guantánamo Docket”; the Center for Constitutional Rights; and British journalist Andy Worthington’s “Guantánamo Files,” as well as by the growing corpus of published memoirs written by former detainees. Cuba’s Guantánamo, on the other hand—particularly inasmuch as its forms of expression depart from, or simply fail to echo, the anti-imperialist narrative that the revolutionary government has championed since the early 1960s—is much less accessible. Cuban writers have long had limited access to the internet, and literary and artistic work produced on the island—particularly in its nonmetropolitan areas, among them Guantánamo Province—circulates sparsely in international contexts. Moreover, individuals’ experiences of living near the base have largely been co-opted into the collective narrative of the Cuban Revolution, in its national dimension as well as its local version: that of a Guantánamo region whose proximity to the US base brought moral ruin to surrounding towns before the revolution’s triumph, and subsequently delivered economic devastation and threats of potential violence. In a particularly sinister vein, the Cuban government’s repression of its own citizens—those who have attempted to seek asylum at the base as well as the

political dissidents incarcerated in the barely acknowledged provincial prisons situated only tens of miles from the base's notorious detention centers—is largely absent from the state-sanctioned record and instead emerges piecemeal from Cuba's highly imperiled independent journalists, exiled activists, and scattered references in fiction and poetry. Cuban Guantánamo's is, consequently, a scant archive, dwarfed by the copious documentation, reportage, and witness accounting pertaining to the detention centers on the base.

A not dissimilar asymmetry presents itself in the legibility, and related legitimacy, of the naval base and detention center's textual and visual record vis-à-vis that of Cuban Guantánamo. There is in the former a pendulum-like play between extremes of surplus and scarcity. On the one hand, what Joseph R. Slaughter, recalling Ranajit Guha, has termed the "bloodless prose of counterinsurgency" ("Life, Story, Violence" 469) and "the massive (and growing) public archive of documentary texts from the U.S. 'war on terror'" (469) has been so prolific in terms of sheer page count, with the WikiLeaks Guantánamo-related document dump of 2011 alone including over seven hundred documents, that its legibility is compromised, inasmuch as it demands practices of reading that renounce concision and coherence. On the other hand, much of this documentation—excluding that released by WikiLeaks, atypical and legally problematic for its lack of redactions—has been heavily censored in the form in which it is publicly available. The writing and art of detainees while held at Guantánamo have been subjected to myriad, externally imposed constraints on their legibility, ranging from the confiscation and classification of detainee poetry, especially that published in reduced and carefully screened form in Marc Falkoff's *Poems from Guantánamo* (2008), to Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary*, a long set of letters published in 2015 after years of legal wrangling, with entire pages blacked out, and detainee artwork first exhibited in New York in late 2017, only to invite a military ruling that no more such work be permitted to leave the detention centers. While accessibility and the local scale of distribution, rather than legibility, is the primary obstacle to reading many of the texts in what I am calling Guantánamo's Cuban archive, the bars to legibility posed by censorship of writing and art by detainees at the naval base have sinister analogs on the other side of the border. Setting aside the practices of self-censorship that Antonio José Ponte, among others, has traced through the six decades of the revolu-

tionary regime, expression of opposition to the Cuban government has been overtly suppressed, often through the incarceration of its authors and a public discrediting of their personal and political writing. This finely calibrated discrediting, bolstered by a watertight surveillance state and the readily wielded accusation of collaboration with the US government and intelligence services, forecloses avenues to verification of many dissidents' claims, such that they are deprived of legibility and legitimacy. Indeed, dissident writing, like most dissident activity in Cuba, is so expertly cast as illegitimate by Cuban institutions, both political and cultural, that to read it alongside less audacious, and thereby more institutionally commended, Cuban work, entails suspending documented verifiability as a criterion, and trusting the word of those whom state power has the means to vilify. It is in this spirit that I count among Cuban Guantánamo's textual production the newsletters of dissidents and political prisoners, printed and distributed in Guantánamo Province without government authorization, some later uploaded to the internet and others held in the personal collections of now-exiled contributors.

With regard to their disciplinary location, or more specifically, the area studies within the purview of which they have fallen, the base and Cuban Guantánamo are different and asymmetrical. The base has been addressed abundantly from within American studies, even as much scholarly work in this field—by Naomi Paik, Jonathan Hansen and Jana K. Lipman, for example—has extended to broader theoretical questions and geographies. Similarly, while the prolific legal scholarship on the detention centers brings to bear international law, most notably with regard to the Geneva Conventions, it must of necessity do so in tandem with the various aspects of US constitutional law that have been upheld, twisted, and breached over the decades of the prisons' existence. By contrast, both Cuba's Guantánamo Province and the US base itself have registered only lightly in Latin American, Caribbean, and even Cuban studies. Peter Hulme's wide-ranging *Cuba's Wild East: A Literary Geography of Oriente* (2011) traces the "literary geography" of Guantánamo and Cuba's other eastern provinces, from the first war for independence from Spain—the Ten Years' War (1868–1878)—to the detention camps opened in 2002. Hulme is one of very few to read detainees' writing together with that of Cubans, and his reflections on the camps' infiltration by Cuban animal life have been an inspiration for this book. Jana K. Lipman's definitive labor history of the US base, *Guantánamo: A Work-*

ing-Class History Between Empire and Revolution (2009), with its analysis of Cuban commuter workers' experiences in the years preceding and immediately following the Cuban Revolution of 1959, is unambiguously grounded in its claim that "Guantánamo is in Cuba" and is a cornerstone of my own study. The migrant crisis of the early 1990s, during which over thirty-four thousand Cubans and fourteen thousand Haitians were held at the base awaiting entry to the United States, has been the focus of considerable scholarship, notably by Elizabeth Campisi and Holly Ackerman. There has more generally, however, been a marked reluctance to extend the scope of Cuban studies, as practiced primarily outside Cuba, to Guantánamo. It is one of the more ambitious aspirations of this book that the compassionate relationships it traces, while unquestionably a product of the *sui generis* space that is Guantánamo, might offer models for understanding in a broader Cuba, rent apart as it has been by over sixty years of struggle—nominally revolutionary, but especially harrowing for those who have assumed positions of counterrevolutionary dissent.

A final asymmetry, and in many ways the one that is most ethically challenging, does not have the border between the base and Cuba as its axis, but rather has dividing lines intersecting throughout the region. This is the asymmetry—indeed, the incommensurability—of what I would name simply, echoing Judith Butler's reading of Guantánamo detainees' poetry, as suffering.⁴ As has now been abundantly documented, in personal memoirs, legal briefings, leaked memoranda, and US government investigatory reports, many men held at Guantánamo, particularly in the first three years of the detention centers' existence, were physically and psychologically tortured—in ways that, despite contortionist attempts on the US government's part to tweak definitions of torture, were unequivocally just that. The myriad aspects of detention at Guantánamo that represent barely imaginable cruelty—indefinite detention without charge, restrictions and deprivations of what in one particularly dark period were termed "comfort items," no information or contact with the world outside the camps, even as distant family members despaired and, in many cases, passed away—appear orders of magnitude apart from the experiences of others in that same space. It is in some ways jarring, then, to see, for example, the cellblock guards being described as bored by their experience, reports on elevated rates of post-traumatic stress disorder among former Guantánamo guards circulating alongside investigative

journalism about the long-term psychological trauma endured by released detainees, listings in the naval station's community newspaper for support groups directed at the nonetheless very real issues that deployed military personnel face, and, in Cuban poetry from the Guantánamo region, the no doubt well-meaning equation of the geographic and existential isolation of the poet to the experience of detainees.⁵ More closely resonant with experiences of detainees at the base's camps are the reports of mistreatment and deprivation in the prisons of Cuba's Guantánamo Province that this book addresses, particularly when the latter are considered as part of longer history of the Cuban Revolution's repressions of its opponents that runs through decades of political imprisonment as recorded in the testimonial writings of, for example, Reinaldo Arenas, Jorge Valls, and Armando Valladares; to the Black Spring of 2003 in which seventy-five dissidents were jailed; to the more recent imprisonment of hundreds of citizens following public protests on July 11, 2021, on charges that Amnesty International has maintained are inconsistent with international law.⁶

With the fraught implications of Guantánamo's asymmetries, incommensurables, and opacities in mind, I hope to hold comparison in the balance for the coincidences, and indeed the sharing, it enlightens. It is around unanticipated commonalities among parties to vastly asymmetrical relationships that compassion forms in the Guantánamo region—commonalities sometimes recognized as such and at other times merely sensed or hoped for, sometimes discovered through direct and physical encounters, and at others through purely imaginary ones. It is the instances of compassion that grow from the rare common grounds of deeply asymmetrical relationships that, in my reading, sustain a Guantánamo that is fundamentally anti-war, in the specific senses in which war has converged on that space. Despite and because of the differences that constitute such relationships, therefore, and in the undergrowth of the intense hostilities that have long governed Guantánamo as a political space, there emerge small gestures of curiosity, kindness, and goodwill that are woven into the poetry, narrative, art, and photography of those who inhabit the Guantánamo region.

Crucially, and to return briefly to Adayfi's iguanas, gestures of compassion on the part of Guantánamo's human inhabitants take shape in an environment that, while it is governed at a political and rhetorical level by the divisions of warfare, is ecologically unrestrained. Not only is

this an area shielded, like that around many military bases, from infrastructural development and consequently, in this very limited sense, unspoiled, it is also, and inevitably, one whose many man-made barriers—a mined fence line, cellblock walls, multiple checkpoints—are brazenly disregarded by the region’s animal inhabitants and are minimal disruptions on the natural landscape writ large. As José Ramón Sánchez writes of the banana rats and iguanas native to this region, in his poem “Animal Planet,” they are “oblivious to the President’s orders” (*Black Arrow* 51). It is often the natural world that sparks compassion within Guantánamo’s asymmetrical human relationships: just as wild animals who respect no borders, and the Caribbean Sea that encircles not the base but the entire island of Cuba, appear as figures of freedom and escape, they also model, and offer impetus for, understanding one’s own experience in the terms of others who occupy the same space. It is in this sense that Guantánamo’s compassionate asymmetries, as I want to call them, become part of a larger, ecocritical concern with how, as in Rachel Price’s reading of contemporary Cuban art, the local bypasses the national to reflect, instead, the planetary.⁷

GUANTÁNAMO AND CUBA’S WAR ON IMPERIALISM

Between 1903, when land at Guantánamo was leased in perpetuity from the government of the new Cuban republic to the United States under the highly contested terms of the Platt Amendment, and 1959, when Castro took power at the head of Cuba’s revolutionary government, Naval Station Guantánamo Bay grew from a coaling station to an active and well-supported base, housing large military and civilian populations. Jonathan Hansen’s *Guantánamo: An American History* traces the base’s development during this period, noting how the scant population of the first two decades of the twentieth century grew to a more stable community in the 1920s and 1930s, rising quickly in numbers, activity and infrastructure during World War II. By 1943, Hansen notes, “some ten thousand Cubans, Jamaicans and West Indians labored on the base alongside four thousand U.S. servicemen and civilians” (181), an expansion that “created the footprint of office buildings, warehouses, jetties, airstrips, magazines, and residential neighborhoods still visible today” (182).

The 1940s and 1950s represent not only the peak of the base’s population and activity but also of its porosity in terms of contact with Cuba.