A New No-Man's-Land: Writing and Art at Guantánamo, Cuba

Esther Whitfield

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Esther Whitfield. *A New No-Man's-Land: Writing and Art at Guantánamo, Cuba*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2024. 216 pp. ISBN: 9780822948155.

Esther Whitfield's *A New No-Man's Land* offers a fresh take on Guantánamo Bay, viewing it as a shared borderland filled with unexpected connections. The author focuses on populations forced to live side-by-side in the contested area, including detainees, US military families, Cuban base workers, and local Cuban residents. By bridging American and Cuban studies, the book provides a deeply human description of Guantánamo as an interconnected cultural space.

The book explores the natural environment as a unifying force, which is one of its three major themes. Whitfield convincingly argues that while fences and minefields strictly divide the US base from Cuba, the local ecology cannot be contained. For detainees, who were systematically disoriented by the military upon arrival, the natural world offered a rare source of comfort and geographic connection. Memoirs by former detainees reveal how the sea became a powerful symbol of hope and shared experience, and how animals like iguanas, banana rats, and local birds offered them moments of solace. Whitfield compares the poetry and writing of detainees, such as Ibrahim al-Rubaish and Mansoor Adayfi, with the work of Cuban poets like José Ramón Sánchez on the grounds that both groups use the imagery of the sea and the island to express their feelings of isolation and their desires for freedom, effectively finding common ground in the landscape.

A second major theme is the subversion of the strict 'us versus them' mindset through surprising personal friendships between captives and captors in Guantánamo Bay. Whitfield highlights sublime moments of solidarity with guards and interrogators, using the memoirs of former detainees like Moazzam Begg, Mohamedou Oud Slahi, and Ahmed Errachidi. For instance, Begg bonded with Black and Hispanic guards over shared histories of racial discrimination and colonial subjugation. Furthermore, some guards developed a deep curiosity about the Muslim faith of the detainees, which even led to

religious conversions, such as the case of military police guard Terry Holdbrooks. Whitfield illuminates these dynamics by analyzing Cuban border guards, who are deployed to defend the Revolution but often find themselves policing fleeing Cuban migrants. Through local Cuban fiction and Daniel Ross's film *La espera*, she demonstrates that the guards often feel empathy and shared vulnerability with the desperate citizens they are ordered to treat as enemies.

The third major theme is the concept of 'home' in a place defined by restriction and impermanence. Whitfield explores how different groups manage to create domestic spaces under highly stressful conditions. Errachidi, for example, mentally hosted elaborate feasts for his fellow inmates and welcomed ants into his cell as comforting guests. Meanwhile, the US Navy community actively promoted a wholesome, small-town 'Mayberry' lifestyle, highlighted in the *Guantánamo Bay Gazette*, to maintain a sense of normalcy and safety despite the nearby prison camps. The book also looks at the 'Special Category Residents'—elderly Cubans who chose to stay working on the base after relations with the US were cut in the 1960s—who maintain nostalgic Cuban traditions while completely cut off from their families just miles away. In the neighboring Cuban town of Caimanera, locals live with heavy military surveillance but survive through a strategy of coexistence, which is vividly captured in local multimedia art.

To develop her arguments, Whitfield draws on diverse sources such as published detainee memoirs, poetry translated from Arabic and Pashto, US military community newspapers, unclassified and leaked military documents, Cuban independent journalism, and visual arts. The primary strength of these sources is their ability to elevate voices that are normally silenced by official government narratives. By analyzing a detainee's painting of the sea alongside a Cuban dissident's underground poetry, Whitfield successfully maps an emotional landscape that ignores military borders. While Whitfield acknowledges the inherent challenges of the archive she uses—namely the asymmetry between the globally visible documentation of US military operations and the restricted, censored Cuban archive—she handles this disparity with academic rigor, ensuring that she highlights shared human experiences without erasing the severe traumas of the detainees.

In conclusion, *A New No-Man's Land* is an extraordinary scholarly work that redefines Guantánamo beyond its legal and political controversies. By carefully analyzing a fragmented and uneven collection of sources, Whitfield documents the enduring human capacity for care, creativity, and connection in a highly contested zone. The book successfully demonstrates how literature, art, and personal narratives can uncover the lived realities hidden beneath global military conflicts.