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# Baseless: Reassessing My Past Through Feminist Utopias

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## Baseless: Reassessing My Past Through Feminist Utopias

When I lived on Guantanamo Bay from 1986 to 1989, the unofficial slogan of the military base, “It don’t Gitmo better than this,” could still be found on sweatshirts, the mural at my preschool, and on banners at the Fourth of July parade where mascot Iggy the Iguana greeted me and the other children. For base residents like my parents and me, the slogan captured the pristine coastline, sunny weather, and relative tranquility of a small community in which the mail arrived weekly via barge and there was one traffic light from which swung a sign reminding drivers, “This is a stoplight.” After invading Afghanistan and Iraq in 2002, the Bush Administration created a prison on Guantanamo to house men they suspected of committing or promoting terrorism. Over seven hundred men have since been imprisoned, many enduring interrogation tactics that include isolation, sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation, and waterboarding. The base has become an international symbol of American aggression, as President Obama recently lamented, “an enormous recruitment tool for organizations like ISIL,” but even when my family lived on Guantanamo, it was a symbol of American imperialism and desire to circumvent domestic and international law. I collect feminist utopian novels in order to better understand the early period of my life spent on Guantanamo and other U.S. Naval bases and to work through my attraction to “base life” and my related guilt.

I purchased *Herland* (1915) on a whim, expecting to be amused by the portrait of a society with only women—all sewing circles and parlor games. Instead, I found author and reformer Charlotte Perkins Gilman grappling with topics still actively debated today: bodily pleasure, environmental destruction, early-childhood education, and the representation of women. I was sympathetic to her frustrations with living in a culture so casually centered on masculine interests, and I was drawn to her vision of a very different society, one carefully orchestrated and harmonious, where land was expertly cultivated, everyone maximized her

potential, and the women helped one another with domestic tasks. But I also recoiled at her eugenic solutions: prohibiting any woman who was deemed unfit from having children and decrying people who lived outside the wall as “savages.” And there they were—the same feelings I had when reflecting back on my time at Guantanamo: a yearning for the pristine and orderly and a repugnance for how that order was achieved. I felt ashamed of the positive feelings I still had for Guantanamo, insufficiently empathetic to those who have suffered there.

Guantanamo. Jacksonville. Pearl Harbor. Miramar. As the daughter of a salvage diver, you grow accustomed to Naval bases, where the trappings of war retreat into a monotonous background of cinderblock housing, beige warehouses, and manicured laws. Bases are like sleeping giants, unnatural worlds where the mechanisms of statehood and family grind quietly together. For me, they represent boredom and security and the period before my parents divorced and my world imploded. Still, I have no illusions about their ethicality. Theodore Roosevelt established Guantanamo in 1898 as part of his ambitious plans to make the U.S. a global military power. The base has existed against the wishes of most Cubans ever since. As an act of protest, Fidel Castro refused to cash any of the annual lease checks the U. S. issued him. I have no illusions about the ethicality of Guantanamo—just nostalgia for it. It is this mixture of feelings that feminist utopias help me to explore. With equal fervency, I oppose American expansionism and support feminism. Whereas I recognize and reject outright the authoritarian nature of most utopias—I would never embrace a Guantanamo-like community in print form—feminist utopias hold many more seductions for me. They entice me into the same position I hold whenever I think back to my time on Guantanamo. Consequently, they also force me to grapple with my attraction to the base. They convince me that the problems with closed communities are not just ideological. They are structural. As I read Mary Bradley Lane’s *Mizora* (1881) and unexpectedly acquired a first edition of Martha Bensley Bruère’s *Mildred Carver, U.S.A* (1919), I began to

truly understand what I already recognized: ordered communities are inherently oppressive and feminist trappings (or the warm glow of early childhood memories) cannot redeem them. At the same time, I also started accepting that my desire for a comfortable childhood was not the problem. We all deserve to grow up in stability and safety.

Of course, more contemporary feminist writers know all this. While I began reading feminist utopias for the personal perspective they provided me, I continued reading them for the insights about community and people that they offer. From the opening description of a wall in *The Dispossessed* (1974), you know that Ursula K. Le Guin understands social complexity: “Like all walls, it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended on which side you were on.” Joanna Russ depicts four societies in *The Female Man* (1975), and the more violent ones may also be the least authoritarian. These works shade over into the dystopian, and their difficulty piecing out the good from the bad is mirrored in their witty and standoffish protagonists: Jael the Reasoner from *The Female Man* with her implanted fangs and claws, testament to her disdain for victimhood; Lillith from Octavia Butler’s *Dawn* (1987), who adeptly navigates the Oankali to ensure human reproduction; Consuelo from Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), righteous despite gross abuses; even Offred from Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), who refuses to renounce bodily pleasure. Some of these women fight on behalf of their neighbors, but they are rarely well regarded by those same neighbors, and I can relate to that. Military bases provide ready community, but you jostle between them, and outside friends are hard to come by and keep.

As I explored feminist utopias further, I also learned that these more recent incarnations of the genre are actually closer in spirit to the earliest utopias. Thomas More originated both the genre and the term “utopia” with his 1516 account of an island republic. He called this republic “Utopia,” Latin for “no place,” and not the identically pronounced “eutopia,” Latin for “good

place,” to suggest his reservations about the society. Utopian novels only earned their reputation for earnestness in the late-nineteenth century, when works like Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) and William Morris’s *News From Nowhere* (1890) promised Victorians relief from growing industrial squalor. Within a few decades, the earnest utopia was no longer: Jack London exploded the genre with the first dystopian novel, *The Iron Heel* (1908). Indeed, *Herland* is a late ideal utopia, and Gilman couches her earnestness in wry humor to appease cynical readers. Witty repartee is one of the pleasures of utopias and dystopias alike. Socratic debates between characters help readers like me process conflicting impulses about community.

Utopias are generally closed societies, but collecting utopian stories has expanded my understanding of community and offered me surprising opportunities for forging connections. I went into Berkley Books, a used bookstore on the Left Bank, looking for *A Movable Feast* or *Down and Out in Paris and London*, something to help digest my experience as a clueless American student in Paris. “Those never stick around long,” owner Phyllis said before handing me a whiskey to drink while browsing. I stumbled across a cheap British copy of Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). The daughter of anthropologists, Le Guin intimately depicts all the insights and failures of living in other cultures. The French are surely more elegant than the Gethenians, but I empathized with Mr. Ai, who is sent to persuade the Gethenians to join the Ekumen alliance and struggles to determine when he commits social faux pas. While Phyllis rang me up, we reminisced about our first readings of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and I learned that her initial months in Paris were tumultuous. Being away from home helps you appreciate that genuine community does not come in prepackaged cinderblock houses whose monotony disguises darker truths. Better to build our communities gradually and flexibly, with crooked paths and weird hedges and people vibrant and stubborn and kind.

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