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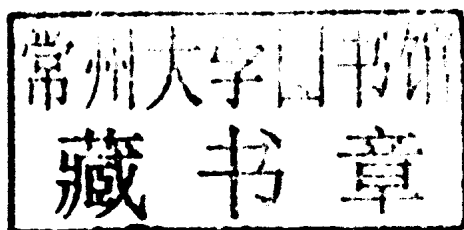
Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction

Judie Newman



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Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction

This book examines the quest for/failure of Utopia across a range of contemporary American/transnational fictions in relation to terror and globalization through authors such as Susan Choi, André Dubus, Dalia Sofer, and John Updike. While recent critical thinkers have reengaged with Utopia, the possibility of terror—whether state or non-state, external or homegrown—shadows Utopian imaginings. Terror and Utopia are linked in fiction through the exploration of the commodification of affect, a phenomenon of a globalized world in which feelings are managed, homogenized across cultures, exaggerated, or expunged according to a dominant model. Narrative approaches to the terrorist offer a means to investigate the ways in which fiction can resist commodification of affect, and maintain a reasoned but imaginative vision of possibilities for human community. Newman explores topics such as the first American bestseller with a Muslim protagonist, the links between writer and terrorist, the work of Iranian-Jewish Americans, and the relation of race and religion to Utopian thought.

Judie Newman is Professor in the School of American and Canadian Studies at The University of Nottingham, UK.

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**This book is dedicated to the memory of
Ellis Edward Newman, 1924–2010**

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1 Introduction

Amy Waldman's 2009 short story, "Freedom", engages directly with the central topic of the current study: the possibility of utopia in a post-terror world. The story opens as a group of political detainees, recognisably akin to the inhabitants of Guantánamo Bay, disembark on a remote Pacific island. Formerly characterised as "so evil they had to be imprisoned on an island beyond the reach of American law",¹ they have now been reclassified as no longer "the worst of the worst" (39) and cleared for release. The snag is that no country is willing to accept them, with the exception of a select few which promise to torture them. Even Albania baulks. It is a Public Relations disaster for the incumbent American president, one of whose officials jokes that

We need to start a new country—it's the only way. (40)

And so they do, and its name is Freedom. The Solomon Islands, hit by a tsunami and desperate for US aid, hand over Fatutaka, an extinct volcano, one of the most remote and rocky islands in the archipelago, and it is transformed at enormous expense into the world's only Muslim democracy. In go the same contractors who created Baghdad's Green Zone and Kabul's American Embassy, with tons of imported topsoil, sand and concrete, to provide it with trees, roads, a mosque, gym, post office, medical centre, and eighty-two nicely appointed bungalows for the new citizens. The resulting suburban subdivision of cul-de-sacs is reminiscent of California's Inland Empire (40) but with additional sea view. Although the new national slogan is "As Good As America™" (40) Freedom is in some respects inimical to its parent state. There is a gated community for the security guards and government personnel. "Freedom was a friendly country, but at the outset it was thought prudent to treat it like an enemy one" (40).

Deliberately constructed to a blueprint, the new community dramatizes the peculiar tension between freedom and coercion in any utopia. Like Thomas More's, the society is planned as a "product" utopia (hence the trademark on the slogan), based upon a principle (here freedom, though in other examples it might be Good or the Ideal Society) and as a result it is heavily regulated, and subject to strict social control.²

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Waldman's story takes its inspiration from recent events which put the nature of American freedoms in the spotlight. In the story the detainees, eighty-two veterans of any number of "combatant status review tribunals" (39) including Yemenis, Uzbeks, North Africans and Uighurs, with some 500 years of captivity between them, arrive at the island no longer wearing Guantánamo-style orange jump suits ("those were so 2002" 39) but still in shackles and blindfolded by wraparound goggles. Combatant status review tribunals were held at Guantánamo Bay (controversially defined by the US Department of Justice as outside US legal jurisdiction) to confirm the status of detainees as enemy combatants. The process was the product of the US doctrine of pre-emption, the idea that threats must be defused before they are actualised, and enemies defeated who have not yet emerged. The tribunals were not trials concerned with past acts, but related to future acts, and to whether the detainee was still a threat. Effectively therefore the war against terror itself relied upon projection into the future.³ In the case particularly of the Uighurs, a Chinese Muslim minority, many of those cleared for release remained none the less in detention. The United States feared that if they returned them to China they would be persecuted or tortured. Although American officials made overtures to more than twenty countries for asylum for the Uighurs, none would accept them. Ironically, the Uighurs, who have traditionally suffered religious persecution at the hands of Chinese Communists, had previously viewed America as a champion of liberty. As their lawyer argued in court, "there might not be a more pro-US Muslim group in the world."⁴ Freedom for the Uighurs, however, amounted to continued detention in Guantánamo, an institution memorably described by Lord Goldsmith, a British government minister, as tarnishing America's reputation "as a beacon of freedom, liberty and justice."⁵

Satire cuts in several directions in the story, targeting the very idea of utopia after terror, the American image of itself as founded on principles of freedom from religious and political persecution, and Imperialism more broadly. In their small boats, the new settlers, a whole clan of exiled Magwitches without return tickets, recall the practice of exporting Europe's problems to its colonies: English convicts sent to Virginia or the Carolinas, or (once America became the land of the free) to Australia. There is no return from the island. Fatutaka, formerly a British colony and still recognising the English monarch as head of state, has been riven by civil conflict since it gained its independence, and is a very typical casualty of empire. Richard Benson, whom the American Foreign Service assign to run the new country, recognises that his post is lowly; as an American diplomat he has "never heard of a country called Freedom" (39). But within the confines of the island he is as all powerful as any colonial authority, "a viceroy—master of the antipodes, lord of this human Galapagos." (40). A benevolent despot, Benson sets out in paternalistic terms to make the island into a home for the detainees, though in the event its evolution holds as many surprises as Galapagos.

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Like many of those who invest in the idea of freedom without addressing the reality of how freedom can be developed and lived through, Benson is well-meaning but fundamentally naïve. When he rebukes one of the guards for shouting at the new arrivals the guard replies that shouting is what they expect.

They haven't shit in six years without someone telling them to and then watching them do it. . . . Free will's a muscle, dude. And theirs is as weak as your biceps. (39)

Indeed most of the men are so institutionalised that they cannot take advantage of any of the opportunities offered by the island. The freed man turns out to be qualitatively different from the free man (40). The restaurant remains empty; the men are so used to being forced to eat alone that they prefer solitude. Any questions from Benson recall their interrogations and are rebuffed. At roll call they refuse to answer to their names. As Abdullah237 explains, they insist on keeping their internment serial numbers as their true identities. The only request made is for plywood and steel mesh for home improvements; the men reconstruct the sleeping cages, seven feet by eight, to which they are accustomed. When Abdullah237 asks Benson if there is a word in English for a place “where everything was perfect, but you still felt miserable” (41), the unspoken answer is clearly utopia.

In this post-terror world narrative and utopia appear to be completely incompatible. The story also overtly questions the value of writing as reparative strategy. As far as the department which runs it is concerned, nobody cares “if Freedom was a happy place, as long as it looked like one” (41), but Benson continues to promote the pursuit of happiness. Assuming that telling their stories would be therapeutic, he tries every means to get the men to disgorge their experiences, from encounter groups to memoir-writing classes and a wiki-history, all to no avail. At the same time, however, behind the scenes, he intercepts the men's letters, in order to censor any suspect material. The men are only going to be allowed to tell the stories which Benson approves. Once censorship is introduced every word becomes suspect to him. “Where did literal speech end and metaphor begin?” (41). If Abdullah237 says he is bored, is it a code to signal a rescue? Does Salman765's longing for his wife's stuffed peppers conceal a nefarious—or even an erotic—meaning? And as for Waheed004's poem, it is quite impossible. Every phrase seems to contain the potential for double and triple meanings. “Language took on the complexity of wartime maneuvers” (41). There is apparently no place for writing in utopia. Language cannot be policed and confined, it eludes authority, and the upshot is that the Department rules that the letters cannot be sent at all. Instead Benson keeps both reading and writing under his control, scrapping the outgoing letters once read, but composing fictitious replies himself, in the guise of mothers, brothers, sons and wives, constructing an external world without suffering or problems, in which Salman765's

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mother makes a sudden recovery from her health problems and Jamal202's little brother gets a university place. "Benson eliminated all pain and suffering, all loss and cruelty, from the responses" (41). By benevolent subterfuge he creates a utopian world, though an external one, at some remove from Freedom; "rather than trying to regulate the human reaction to difficult events, he had rewritten the events" (41). Writing creates utopia but utopia and Freedom are no longer synonymous.

When the men do decide to flex their free-will, the results are decidedly anti-utopian. Deafened by their loud music Benson introduces a system of laws, realising that "order was more easily enforced than happiness" (41). Surveillance follows and even cruel and inhuman punishment. The Bush administration had declared the detainees to be illegal combatants, unprotected by the Geneva Convention (and thus vulnerable to torture) and maintained that the President must be free to define what counts as torture.⁶ On Freedom anyone who contradicts the rules is forced to listen for six hours to Verdi at high volume. "No civilised country could ever call opera torture" (41). Faced with Benson's coercion, the detainees, formerly a motley group of different ages, professions and nationalities, unite and begin to be radicalised. Bingo is condemned as un-Islamic and beards begin to sprout. Freedom is recognised overtly as a fiction. Significantly the first suicide is "suicide by book" (41). The victim weights himself down with heavy volumes and drowns. Instead of writing, the men use silence and non-verbal techniques of resistance. When Benson teaches them how to play charades they respond enthusiastically, wordlessly re-enacting the conditions of their captivity, miming forced feeding and anal probings, limping as if in shackles, hurling imaginary faecal cocktails and staging re-enacted tribunals, each with one panic-stricken desperate pleader and four stony-faced judges. Finally they reject the language of their rulers, beginning with the term Freedom itself. When they suggest a name change for the island, they offer critical variations on Utopia's original Greek meaning (no place): *La makan* (no place), *La bilad* (no land), *Bidoun* (without), *Al Wajl* (misery) and most significantly *Al A'raf*. As Edgar Allan Poe described the latter to his publisher, it is

a medium between heaven and hell where men suffer no punishment, but yet do not attain that tranquil and even happiness which they suppose to be the characteristics of heavenly enjoyment.⁷

Although Benson extends his censorship to the Quran, locking away all copies, the hard-line Islamists come out with a majority on the ruling council and he is forced to exercise his veto. For Benson heaven has become something closely approaching hell.

On the island only the Uighurs have kept busy, carving intricately fashioned wooden furniture. Knowing how keen the government is to promote free markets, Benson proposes to export it, assuming that it will appeal to conscience consumerism, much as Western consumers will buy coffee harvested by pygmies or necklaces made by Romanian street kids. He is

overruled in the name of security (40). Freedom is incompatible with the free market. Undeterred the Uighurs continue to make furniture which crops up all over the island, here an abandoned table for ten, there a row of bare bedframes, in groupings which silently evoke the absence of their families and satirise the claims of the island as “home”. Faced with the defeat of all his projects for the pursuit of happiness, Benson decides the men must have their wives and children with them—and is promptly refused. Abdullah²³⁷ roundly declares that “He didn’t want his son breathing Freedom’s air” (42). America, however, manipulates desire to its own ends and works out how to use the oppression of women to its advantage, advertising worldwide for mail order brides. In a sad reflection of the conditions of women in many parts of the world, there is no shortage of volunteers to marry total strangers and remain forever at a safe distance from their families and homelands. In a horrible parody of an Islamic paradise, new brides are shipped in for the men, and they form new family groups, replete with their defiantly named children, a plethora of Osamas, Jihads, Zawahiris and Qutbs. As the years pass, with divorces, fights, suicides and murders, “Freedom became as good as America after all” (42).

Freedom begins as a joke and ends in disillusion, but the story itself does not end on quite such a pessimistic note. As a withering critique of American pretensions to freedom and democracy the story also offers a postcolonial parable, underlining the fact that freedom cannot be merely given but must be won. The idea of freedom does not die. At the close of the story Benson returns to witness the mass exodus of the detainees’ children, six dozen teenagers in four huge boats, pushed off by their parents, and paddling furiously towards the horizon. Fairly obviously Waldman evokes Oscar Wilde’s dictum that

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out and, seeing a better country, sets sail.⁸

As the ending indicates utopia is not a place but the spirit of hope itself. In the story when freedom becomes Freedom it dies; the concept does not survive institutionalisation. Freedom has to be kinetic, freedom from something or towards something, and is constituted in resistance. It is Benson’s coercions that trigger the men’s opposition; their freedom is forged in struggle. In the words of Bill Ashcroft,

This then is the dynamic function of the utopian impulse. Not to construct a place, but to enact the utopian in the engagement with power.⁹

How does fiction enact this engagement? Waldman’s story highlights, in Benson’s reaction to the ambiguities of language, the slipperiness of its own method. In the story every time the word “freedom” is used, the reader has