Y-Dang Troeung and Phanuel Antwi

"In this very uncertain space"

A Conversation with Omar El Akkad

Omar El Akkad is one of the most compelling new voices to emerge onto the Canadian and global literary scene. His critically acclaimed first novel, *American War*, has been translated into thirteen languages. The novel is ambitious in scope and scale: it is an unsentimental depiction of a family uprooted and displaced by war; a meditation on the banality and cruelty of life on hold in a refugee camp; a complex exploration of the psychological legacies of war that traverse time and space; and, finally, a literary work that combines various forms and genres (science fiction, climate fiction/"cli-fi," refugee narrative, war story, detention testimony, fictionalized archives, *Bildungsroman*, and more). As it extrapolates from the present into an imagined dystopian future, *American War* also offers a stunning refraction of the past. Beginning in the year 2075 when the state of Louisiana has become a new battleground between warring factions, the narrative follows a family from Louisiana as they flee their home to a refugee camp located in the "Free Southern State," a newly formed successionist country that is at constant war with the US. Here, the protagonist, Sarat Chestnut, is taken in by a recruiter who trains her to become a rebel insurrectionist. From here, Sarat learns to navigate and move through the borders of her new world—a world characterized by military checkpoints, quarantine zones, detention centres, drone warfare, and rapidly eroding coastlines. By the end of the novel, all that is left of Sarat's story—a dark-skinned girl from the South who became a martyr for the cause of the rebel South—are the archival fragments that her nephew, Benjamin Chestnut, must piece together from his home in the neutral territory of New Anchorage, Alaska, a generation later.

American War captures war's distortion of linear time and progress wherein the feared future for some is inevitably the unmourned past and the terrifying present for others. From the permanence of wartime and the carceral inhumanity of the camp, to the impunity of the border patrol and the rightlessness of detention, *American War* casts an unflinching gaze at the intersecting violences that mark our global simultaneities. The book disorients and inverts our coordinates of north and south, inviting us to consider the ruinous costs of continuously reinforcing colonial borders. *American War* gets us to think about how, despite the celebrations of globalization, travel, and new social networking devices, we remain in a world of compartmentalized sectors. Those of us in the spaces of privilege and settlement, even with our gazes cast outward, remain blind to the devastation that happens elsewhere, and dismissive of the ways in which we are involved in it.

The novel's concern with global geopolitical entanglements has been undoubtedly influenced by Omar El Akkad's own biography and multiple transnational crossings. Born in Cairo, Egypt, El Akkad grew up in Doha, Qatar, and moved to Canada when he was sixteen years old. He attended high school in Montreal and Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, where he earned a degree in computer science. As a journalist for *The Globe and Mail* for ten years, El Akkad reported on war and conflict from around the world, including the war in Afghanistan, the military trials at Guantanamo Bay, the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt, and the Black Lives Matter movement in Ferguson, Missouri. He is a recipient of Canada's National Newspaper Award for investigative reporting and the Goff Penny Memorial Prize for Young Canadian Journalists. In 2015, he turned his hand to fiction. In 2018, *American War* was shortlisted for a number of prominent literary prizes and garnered public attention as a finalist on the CBC Canada Reads competition.

Intrigued by his thought-provoking debut novel, we invited Omar El Akkad to UBC in March 2019. He travelled to Vancouver from Portland, Oregon, where he is currently based. His visit included a guest lecture in the course *Postcolonial Literature: Borders and Violence,* a private interview with us in the afternoon, and a public lecture at the university in the evening. The following is an abridged and edited text that combines our multiple conversations with the author throughout that day about his novel, journalism, literary influences, migrations, and political visions of the future. We found El Akkad's experience and insights on these topics to be capacious and wide-ranging. He moved seamlessly between disparate topics, spaces,

and texts, offering at once a deep dive into the specifics of his novel as well as a general commentary on some of the most unsettling issues facing the world today. We kept circling back to the relationship between violence and the production of uncertainty—the unpredictability of movement and refuge for the displaced; the ambiguity and risks of racial representation; the secrecy of detention and redaction; and the uncertainties of the future in times of change and crisis.

A Crisis of Otherness, Walls, and Borders

Y-Dang Troeung: In *American War*, the reader is first introduced to the novel's protagonist Sarat and her family as they are displaced from their home in Louisiana as a result of a war fuelled by both environmental and political conflict. Can you say more about your thinking about the themes of war and displacement in your novel, and how your life experiences may have influenced this?

Omar El Akkad: Almost the entirety of my social circles growing up in Qatar were people from somewhere else. One of the earliest memories I have in relation to what we call being a refugee and being a migrant has to do with the violence of language. What we call these folks is really important. We have a spectrum of what we call these folks. Where I lived in Qatar, we had "expats," and expats were white Westerners. They were there, but they didn't need to be there. We were grateful for the expertise that they brought to running the various infrastructures. But then you work your way to "migrant," and the migrant is probably someone who is doing a lot more work, a lot more labour-intensive work, but doesn't have the privilege of being called an expat. And then you work your way all across "refugee" until you get to "illegal." That's the other end of the spectrum. I'm not sure that we have any kind of framework for dealing with people who have been forced away from the place they call home.

YT: The characters in *American War* are constantly being driven from their homes or from the refugee camps where they are being housed, but the borders they are crossing in the imaginative world you've built in the narrative have shifted from the present day. The story and use of cartography in your novel invite us to think about the arbitrary nature of national borders, and by extension, the relationship between the colonial construction of geopolitical borders and the production of refugees and precarious migrants.

OEA: There are certain things I do in my writing that I think alienate a lot of readers. One of them is that I have no respect for the nation-state as an

entity. You pick up this book [points to *American War*] and my short stories, and the borders have been moved around. Florida is underwater, and I've created an empire here and reversed the flow of migration there. I have very little respect for the entity of the nation-state as an unchanging thing, so there's a map at the beginning of *American War* and if you look at it, there's a huge chunk of the Southwest that's now called the Mexican Protectorate. I would get questions at book events in the US like: "Where did you come up with this map?" In response, I would say, "This is just an old map. This is what it used to look like. This was Mexico. I didn't invent any of this." But we're not primed to think that way. We're primed to think of these lines on the map as very sacrosanct. I come from a part of the world where a hundred years ago a bunch of British and French guys just drew arbitrary lines and we live with that now. Lebanon as an entity is a surreal entity from a cultural perspective. I believe there is still a law on the books where the president has to be Christian and the prime minister has to be Muslim to make everybody happy because it's an arbitrarily conceived thing that has become sacred. My frustration whenever I talk about the notion of being a refugee, or even being a migrant of any kind, is this: it always stems from this notion that we started from a contrived thing and we're making the lives of many people a living hell so that we can save the presumed sanctity of a contrived thing. There has got to be a better way than that. I'm not a geopolitical expert, and I'm not an academic and I don't know what that framework is, but I refuse to accept the ruin of so many people's lives to save this entity that I don't think is really under that much stress. I'm not of the opinion that it's a crisis, and if it is a crisis, then it's a crisis that can be solved by means other than destroying the lives of human beings.

Phanuel Antwi: I'm curious about what you just said—"I'm not of the opinion that it's a crisis." Can you meditate more on this word crisis for us?

OEA: It's not a crisis in absolute terms. It's not a crisis in relative terms. If it's a crisis in relative terms, then Lebanon has a migrant crisis. Lebanon is arguably taking on more refugees than the entirety of Europe with respect to people fleeing Syria. It's also not a crisis in terms of the resiliency of the systems in place. If a few people showing up in your country to escape what is the bloodiest ongoing war in the world are enough to bring your systems down, your systems were pretty terrible to begin with. It is actually a crisis of otherness. It's a crisis of people who don't look like others showing up at their shores. The result is a surreal, almost Kafkaesque, way of dealing with things. You have things like the Dublin agreement, where wherever you

land first in Europe is where you're going to be processed, and so people are desperately trying not to get fingerprinted in Greece, because you don't want to go through the Greek system, and so you try to get out of there. Hungary is building more walls, but no one wants to stay in Hungary; "nobody cares," they are saying, "just let us through." It is a fear-driven system and the thing that is the subject of the fear is otherness. I have very little sympathy for some of the richest places on earth that are trying to turn things around and repeat what was the treatment of others in the lead up to the World Wars. You know, this notion that the "boat is full" or this notion that "the walls are up for a reason," or "the barbarians are at the gates." The next thing you know, it's all gates, and you've gated yourself in. I have no respect for this notion that it's a crisis. That's obviously my personal position, and there are a lot of foreign ministers in Europe who vehemently disagree, and they have a lot more say than I do, but I don't for a second believe that this is a real stress against the institutions. It's a stress test of xenophobia.

PA: There are multiple modes of flight happening in your novel, and oftentimes these modes appear as competing flights. The characters seem to be faced with the perpetual dilemma of whether to stay in place and risk being killed, or to move across borders without a clear sense of where they will end up. It's an impossible calculation they have to make.

OEA: Honestly, I like that, because there was a preconception certainly in my mind, when I was writing this book, that movement is a very controlled thing: that you're going from Point A to Point B and you know where Point B is. You know how you're going to get there and why you're going to get there. But the very first real migration in the book—the very first instance of this kind of movement—is when Sarat's family is crossing this river. The bombs are falling down the road, and the last line of that particular chapter essentially tells the reader they never actually had to leave their home. It turns out the bombs never came closer. They could've stayed at home. That was really important to me—to resist the idea of movement as a controlled thing, because it's not a lot of the time. Certainly, I grew up around people who, in one form or another, were all migrants, refugees, whatever term you want to use, across that spectrum that ranges from "expat" to "illegal," depending on how you feel about these human beings. I've met people who continually were products of serendipity, products of this serendipitous movement. You know? I'm Palestinian by way of Jordan, and there's a funny story about that. I wanted to get at that. I wanted to get at that notion; that's why there's little in the way of clear-cut motion.

Race, Proximity, and Intimacy

YT: In *American War*, you provide so much detail that allows readers to connect with the characters, but there's a particular strategy that we find fascinating and that is your leaving the racial backgrounds of the characters open and unspecified. Can you talk about this?

OEA: In America, this point about race has been a fundamental point of criticism of the book—the notion that you're going to write about a Second American Civil War and race is so rarely overtly mentioned in the book. How can you do that? That's a valid criticism of the book. One issue around the question of race is that I've been trying to find my place in this country [the US]. When I was writing this book, I wasn't able to find it. And I wrote this op-ed for *The Guardian* about what it means to be a brown person in Trump's America [see "I've always been"]. And one of the lines in the op-ed is [paraphrasing]: You know, I've been Arab all my life. I've been Muslim pretty well all my life. I wasn't brown with a capital "B" until I came to America. I'm trying to figure out what that is. I'm coming to the conclusion that before I can make anything of this country, I have to figure out what this country makes of me. And I was in that sort of very uncertain space when I was writing this book, so this book is in this very uncertain space.

With respect to the individual characteristics—and this is particularly true of the racial characteristics, but also sexuality, for example, and gender—what I tried to do was move along the axis of proximity to the character. I believe there's this thing that Toni Morrison said: How do you know the character in a novel is black? Well, you're told. How do you know a character is white? You're not told. Right? There's the element that you know what the default represents. And so instead of working along that axis of the default (and I'm not going to bother telling you), I try working along the axis of proximity. The more time we spend with this character, the more I'm going to tell you about their characteristics. Sarat is a character of intersectionality. You don't get that essentially for anyone else in this book, right? Because the threshold relates to proximity. I don't know if that's a proper strategy to employ. But it was really, really important to me.

YT: I think it's a strength of the book that you refuse that legibility or that kind of straightforward mimesis that we've come to expect when it comes to race.

OEA: I was sort of dealing with this notion of the negative space of who you are. I don't want to exist in a world where black writers only write about black issues and brown writers only write about brown issues and white writers write about love. I don't want that. I really don't want that to exist. It was

important to me that every character in the novel—or at least the characters we are spending time with—is afforded the positive space and the negative space. They're afforded the chance to talk about who they are in whatever portion they feel is necessary to them. That's a really hard tightrope to walk. I think I fell off it at times in the book, but it was something I was conscious of because I would consistently get things like: "Hey! We would really love an op-ed about the Muslim Ban. And we would really love an op-ed about this thing that you are—this thing we assume you are—this thing we assume you *only are*!" And that's fine and all important to talk about. But I also want that other stuff. And I do not want to cede claim to that other stuff that's important to me.

PA: It seems you are trying to recalibrate a grammar for race (perhaps maybe identity) in this novel through the language of intimacy, which you say sits on a plain of proximity. This approach both works and doesn't work. But even when it doesn't work, it still has the effect of jolting readers into contemplation.

OEA: I mean that's fascinating to me, right? First of all, I think intimacy is a better word for me than proximity, because you get close to people in this story. You're absolutely right about that notion of when it doesn't work, it still works. That's fascinating because one of the things I've struggled with is how to write from the place where I'm at right now, which is how to coexist in America (North America) as a conceptual entity. The nation-state on which I exist is founded on a bedrock of wrong, right? It's founded on these twin sins: this genocide and this enslavement. And one is directly responsible for the geographic growth for the entity called the nation-state. And one is directly responsible for the economic growth of the entity we now call this nation-state. And how do you proceed from a place of wrongness? And what does that mean about present-day interpellations? I don't know. I try to wrap my head around that. It's difficult for me to find my footing in that.

Fabulation and Archives

YT: Can you talk about your experience as a journalist reporting on and moving through spaces that have been marked by violence such as military bases, Guantanamo Bay, and refugee camps in the Middle East? How did the accounts of these spaces make it into the novel?

OEA: I was a journalist for ten years and I very much wanted to be a foreign correspondent. I very much wanted to cover wars. I wanted to cover stories that, had I not covered them, most people would not hear about. For years

I did the exact opposite. For years, I was a tech journalist. I would write about the new iPhone. If you didn't hear about the new iPhone from me, you would have heard of it from eight hundred other journalists. It was the exact opposite of what I wanted to do with my life. There were times when I did do [what I wanted], in places like the suburbs of Kandahar. We went with a UN polio vaccination team one time just to see how work is done, and I was the only journalist there. And you know that sort of story has been done a million times before, but that was an instance of me being able to do the work that mattered to me because not a million other people were doing that. And it was a story that needed to get out. Because I was so interested in covering conflict, in all its forms, I got to see violence in all its forms. When I was around twenty-five, I first went to Afghanistan. I had read too much Hemingway, and I had this really juvenile male perspective of this swashbuckling war correspondent. It was horseshit. None of it was real.

What I did see were the various forms of violence that take place in wartime. There was the obvious physical violence of bombardment, destruction, and ruin, but then there was another layer of violence. That was the violence of language, of euphemism, of bureaucracy; of "collateral damage" when what you mean is "we killed innocent people"; of "enhanced interrogation" when what you mean to say is "torture"; of "unlawful enemy combatants" when what you mean to say is "we don't want the Geneva Conventions to apply to this person." And *that* layer was important to me, because I didn't think you could get away with the other top layer (of bombs dropping and guns firing) if you didn't have that other layer to sustain it.

And the place I saw this most overtly was Guantanamo Bay. Guantanamo Bay was one of the most sanitized places you could ever go to. We were going to Camp X-Ray at one point. If you ever see pictures of the first detainees in Guantanamo, they were in the orange jumpsuits and they were in these things that looked like oversized dog kennels. That's Camp X-Ray. And we were going to see the remains of it. And you have to stop at a stop sign where these little blonde girls skip across the street to the officer side. [The scene looked] something like the Stepford Wives kind of idealized. Those things exist in close proximity and nobody bats an eye. And the way that you know they exist is because there is immense linguistic bureaucratic euphemistic violence happening. It's where the detention camps are at.

PA: I want to go to some of the methods at work in your novel, particularly how you use fabulation. Saidiya Hartman talks about the idea of "critical fabulation" in her essay "Venus in Two Acts" as a literary gesture of "straining

against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration" (11). In your novel, you make things up, but the making up of things is not just pure speculation. It also informs and reforms default perceptions. Can you tell us a little bit about the ways you bring in archives? By methods, I'm thinking about the ways you tabulate your many different source materials, the official archives, alongside the fake source documents you fabricated.

OEA: I like that word "fabulation"—that's exactly what it is. At Guantanamo, I asked one of the commanders—one of the officers—a question. I said something like, how do the soldiers—how do the prisoners—as soon as I say the word "prisoners," one of the other soldiers stops me and says, "We don't have prisoners here sir. We have detainees." There's a really important reason for that. "Prisoner" implies a prison sentence, which is a finite thing or at least a defined thing. A detainee can be held forever. The source documents in the novel are very much about that kind of violence. The one example from the novel I go back to all the time is the censored letter from the Sugarloaf detainee—Sugarloaf being very obviously based on Guantanamo. And when, if you ever listen to the audiobook, when Dion Graham gets to that part, he just says "redacted, redacted." And it just has this numbing effect. I couldn't have done that in a straightforward narrative. I needed this kind of mechanism, and so the source documents were very much a means of exploring that kind of violence, which is much more a violence of negative space, of the violence of the things you don't say and the way you get around saying things and the passive voice and all of that. That was the sense of the use of the source documents.

PA: Your use of "redaction" brings to mind the work of two black feminist thinkers, Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* and Christina Sharpe's *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*. For them blackness undergoes redaction, it gets blacked out, cut off; redaction, black redaction in particular, enacts an ethical refusal to reinscribe the colonial and imperialist violence often inscribed in the archive; and, in so doing, ruptures the euphemisms, *the* archives that constitute our social imagination. In a way then, black redaction can offer a method of protecting oneself from that structuring violence of negative space.

OEA: I think in terms of the idea of redaction, the idea of taking away is a central part of this toolkit by which I think we all do a very human thing, which is to try to create a world that accepts us. I think everybody, at an individual

and institutional level, is trying to do that. But it's a very different thing in terms of whether you're in the privileged group or in the non-privileged group, or if you're within the institutions of power or without the institutions of power. This is a book called "American War" that backgrounds America. America is not centred in this book. It is in large part ignored and in large part subjected to fairly grotesque manipulations to fit whatever I wanted it to fit. I think it's a fundamental kind of element in the toolkit. When you come from an unprivileged place, or a place that doesn't have access to the power centres, what you're trying to do, to a certain extent, is to redact elements of these power centres that make a world you're now accepted in. When you're in those centres of power, what you're redacting is the truth. But the end goal in a kind of really terrifying way is somewhat similar, which is that I want to be accepted and I want for my actions to be accepted. Sometimes your actions are grotesque. This is what people have to do in Guantanamo to justify this entire infrastructure being created. When you're doing monstrous things, somebody has to be the monster. And if it's not the person having it done to them, then it's you and a lot of the infrastructure—the linguistic infrastructure—around that kind of redaction. We'll disappear what we have to disappear to make this work conceptually and to make us acceptable.

YT: One of the passages from your book that stood out to me was the fake source document in the form of a diary of a rebel recruiter, the "Found Cause Diary." This caught my attention because of my research on the Cold War in Cambodia and how the Khmer Rouge regime came to power. Achille Mbembe talks about this process in his work on necropolitics, about how places that collapse under the strain of violence give rise to new mechanisms of predation—"war machines" he calls them. In your novel, Sarat gets taken in and trained by rebel recruiters and they use her to further their cause. What influenced your ideas about war and radicalization?

OEA: When I was covering the "Toronto 18" case, when I was at *The Globe and Mail*, I was writing about one of the recruiters, the mentors. The case was mostly these young boys, eighteen or seventeen, who had all these plans to storm Parliament Hill. But then there were a bunch of these guys who were much older and who weren't planning to do any of this stuff themselves, but did sort of mould these kids and kind of direct them towards that path. And at one point we're writing about one of these guys, and I discover that what this guy did towards the very end, just before the arrests happened, was to go to one of these kids and say, "Get in the car, we're going for a ride." He takes them up three hours north of Toronto into these forests. Earlier in the day,

this guy had gone up and he had dug a grave; he dug a sort of plot in the middle of the forest. He takes this kid up there and they walk out; it's pitch black and they walk out into the forest, and he tells the kid to lie down in the grave. The kid lies down in the grave, and then this older man says, "This is what it's going to look like if you don't commit martyrdom on behalf of your cause, you don't get to go to heaven, you lie down in the grave for all of eternity."

You can imagine if I was trying to recruit you to do something and I led with that, you'd tell me to get lost immediately, right? But this came at the tail end of a year-long process of slow radicalization. It started at the very beginning with, "Hey brother, have you seen pictures of what they are doing to your brothers and sisters in Chechnya?" "Have you seen pictures of what they are doing to your Palestinian brothers and sisters?" That sort of thing. You very slowly work your way. I wanted to get at that notion of how you can take real damage and you can take real injustice and you can take a very real point of saying this is wrong and you can use that as a starting point for a very slow process of turning someone evil. A lot of the book is about that, about the process of how you shape somebody into the contours of very evil things. That's why I wanted to start with that image of honey, and I think honey shows up again later on in the book at certain points. I was thinking about how you can mold someone into the contours of their surroundings. And if their contours are unjust, maybe they are a powerful person and they can respond with love and hope, but I think for most people there comes a point when they become the injustice themselves.

Speculations of the Future, or Reflections of the Past?

YT: I'm interested in some of the debates about the book. Is it a cautionary tale of the future? Is it an allegory of the past for some? Or is it a mirror of the present for others? Everyone seems to have different opinions about this.

OEA: My experiences, my very limited experiences, covering war have led me to believe that being on the receiving end, being on the losing end of a war, is very much akin to moving backwards in time. You look at pictures of places—I was based in Kandahar for quite a bit—if you look at pictures of Kandahar and Kabul from fifty-sixty years ago, those are places that look relatively futuristic compared to the [way they look in the] present day. The same is true not just of physical violence but also of economic and political violence. Cairo, where I grew up, Alexandria, where my family is from—same thing. In pictures from the 1950s and 1960s the place looks

like it's [advanced in comparison with the current] moment. So I wanted to get at this notion that being on the losing end of the war is akin to moving backwards in time, which is why it's not a very futuristic book.

YT: What I hear you saying is that time has not moved in a linear way in places that have been on the receiving end of violence.

OEA: *American War* is a book that is set in a future that not only is not futuristic, but that's actively opposed to the future as a concept of infinite possibility. I think this is a really refreshing way of looking at the future and I have no problems [with the idea] of the future as a space of infinite possibility. But there is a certain privilege involved in that, right? It's the privilege of the ever upward sloping line. And a lot of my work—this novel, the novel I am now editing, and my short stories—is not predicated on that kind of timeline. It's predicated on a hill-shaped timeline. And it's predicated on the possibility that we may be living at the top of the hill right now. And so my futuristic vision is not particularly, you know, the bombs are about to go off or the bombs have already gone off. It's in mid-explosion. The notion of the descent. And that's how the future is dreamed in this book—the moment of descent and what you do in that moment. I certainly never intended to predict anybody's future with this book. There are moments since the book came out that seem prophetic, but if you throw 350 pages worth of darts at a wall, you're going to hit a bull's eye just out of pure luck, you know? So that was never my intent. My intent was to transpose someone else's present, not predict somebody's future.

PA: There's a theme of the sentimentality of material objects in the book, of how people try to carry the past with them despite having lost everything. How were you thinking about materiality and objects as archives?

OEA: The issue of sentimentality and what the past represents was on my mind quite a bit when I was writing the book. I grew up in Qatar and Qatar is only ten percent Qatari. Only ten percent of the population is born and raised in Qatar. Ninety percent is from somewhere else. And they've shown up largely because there's a ton of oil money. I had a lot of Palestinian friends, which is to say that these are people who had never been to Palestine. Their parents and grandparents had a notion of what that is, and I would go to people's houses and their grandparents would be wearing necklaces with keys on them. I think that image shows up in *American War* a couple of times—people wearing keys. And the keys are to houses that no longer exist. They'd been razed. That notion of this item of sentimentality and this item of memorabilia standing in for something that no longer exists is a recurring

thing that I would see in places that were on the receiving end of violence. The past is yours in a way that the present can never be yours. When you don't have agency, when you live in a refugee camp, even if you live outside of your country because you've been forced to live outside of your country, you own the past in a way that you can never really own the present.

YT: The narrator of *American War*, Benjamin, is a historian of the Second American Civil War who is trying to piece together fragments of the past, against the official accounts that have been compiled. How does erasure and narrative reconstruction come into play in the novel?

OEA: At one point, in one of the earlier drafts of the novel, one of those fake source documents is a magazine article written by Benjamin the Second, the narrator, [about his return] many decades later to the site of his failed olive grove where the old border used to be, to write a story about how some people were saying that years ago there was this massacre here at this place called Patience. And he talks to some people who say, "Nope, there was never a Camp Patience, that never happened," and some people who say, "Yeah, twenty thousand people were killed, it was a massacre," and he can't figure out what happened because the past is malleable. That's what I was trying to get at: this notion of the past being something you can't change and that you have to live with.

Ambiguity, Anger, and Restraint

PA: I want to loop us back again to the kind of restraint you've had to exercise in terms of wanting to get at the way things have happened in the past and at the very same time not wanting to be prophetic, to predict, not wanting to give us or represent the world in a mode that is certain and assured. I'm interested in the modes of restraint, not resistance, that you've had to exercise, that you've had to hold onto in adopting this process in writing *American War*.

OEA: It's a really interesting question, because it is one of the ways in which I try to measure myself as a writer. And I don't know. I hope as a writer I've come to exercise restraint, because there are certain writers I will read on any occasion. I'll read anything Toni Morrison has to say about anything. I'll go back and read James Agee's movie criticism. You know, I'm not one of those writers. I don't have that capacity. What I need to write about is what feels necessary. A lot of the time, for me, what feels necessary directly correlates with what makes me angry, and writing from anger is a really dangerous space. I remember reading an interview with James Baldwin where he talks

about channeling anger into his writing. I will never, never get to that place, or possess the kind of alchemy that someone like Baldwin had where you can take that anger and transform it into a kind of love, into a kind of state where you can call out the injustice from a place of feeling so viscerally, and yet be able to say something deeply profound. I don't have that. I work towards it and try for it, but . . .

YT: I'm thinking of Frantz Fanon too, of his description of colonialism—of the violence of colonialism that produces muscle twitches and nervous conditions that are important for the project of decolonization if channelled, but that also take a toll on the psyche of the individual who's doing the work. There's that dialectical tension of that anger and the channelling of it for a certain cause.

OEA: It used to be a point of pride for me that I sound like this; that I'm so well versed in English that I pass through TSA at the airport. I could talk about the Lakers' game the night before. I could talk about *Arrested Development*. And we'd be fine. It would be an element of safety. I have cousins who have my name and my skin colour, who have my background, who don't have my accent. And they're on secondary at airport security every time. I used to think of it as a method of protection, as a point of pride. Look at me. Look at me . . . I figured I'm in the Big Show. And recently I started thinking about the opportunity costs: my Arabic is terrible. My knowledge of Arabic history, my knowledge of Arabic literature is terrible. Solmaz Sharif, who is one of my favourite poets in America, has this poem out where she's talking about her Iranian father being assaulted by a Texan. And the moment where he feels the imposition of this violence that's happening to him, he screams out in his mother tongue. The notion of the opportunity cost of what that system has done for you is something I think is at the heart of the kind of expression I'm trying to do. Because for a long time I thought of this as success, as having made it, because you know growing up in a country that was colonized by the British, you learn English. You learn that language. You're there. You've done it.

YT: Thank you very much, Omar, for taking the time to speak to us to today so openly and generously. It has been a pleasure for both of us. We are greatly looking forward to what you will do next.

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