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BORDERS, REFUGEES, AND SPACES OF AMNESIA:  
OMAR EL AKKAD'S *AMERICAN WAR*

INTRODUCTION:  
SPACES OF AMNESIA AND GHOSTED COMMUNITIES

Bruno Latour considers that human agency is imbricated in the Anthropocene, where it has turned into a geological force able to shape the Earth and, as such, involves human responsibility. However, it is unviable to consider an undifferentiated *Anthropos* as the agent of the present state of planetary degradation. According to Latour, the Anthropocene could be “another name for the attempts of neoliberalism to define the globe.”<sup>1</sup> Holding the entire *humankind* liable for the Anthropocene veils arguable neutrality, which empties out the political content of historical, social, gender, and racial factors.<sup>2</sup> Although we are all in the Anthropocene, “we are not all in it in the same way,”<sup>3</sup> which gradates the responsibility of the agents implied. Those with a questionable agency in their hands—and therefore hardly responsible for the material circumstances of the Anthropocene—are also those usually sentenced to inhabit a “space of amnesia,” one cross-stitched by the confluence of racial,

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour, “Anthropology at the Time of the Anthropocene—A Personal View of What Is to be Studied” (Lecture at the American Association of Anthropologists, Washington, December, 2014), n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Nixon, “The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea,” in *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene*, ed. Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero and Robert S. Emmett (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019), 8; Marco Armiero, *Wasteocene* (Cambridge: CUP, 2021), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Nixon, “The Anthropocene,” 8.

social, and gender vectors.<sup>4</sup> Discourses of belonging have been founded in that space reserved for “ghosted communities,”<sup>5</sup> which haunt the national imaginary on its way to progress, their fuel to foster by opposition premises of homogeneous community building. Such premises have historically been the cornerstone of the nation-state pedagogical basis, the multifarious violence performatively inflicted on non-citizens,<sup>6</sup> and the ground for their strategies of resistance against invisibility.

This paper examines *American War*, the first novel by the US-based Canadian writer Omar El Akkad,<sup>7</sup> to highlight climate and war refugees as a “ghosted community,” one strategically placed within a national “space of amnesia,” and to later configure a mirror of otherness able to return to the political community a predication of its homogeneity. Then, as nation-state-centred discourses of patriotism are challenged by the ambivalence implemented by the making and unmaking of borders in the novel, attention is paid to the vigilance on the spaces of adjacency. The confinement of refugees in camps and the existence of detention centres to annihilate contemporary threats embodied in the terrorist combatant illustrate how the political sovereignty relies on borders created on exemption. The multiplicity of narratives around the novel protagonist, Sara T. Chestnut (Sarat) helps interrogate the sovereignty that the nation-state claims over historical interpretation, while readers are challenged into spaces of ethical compromise to detect the (mis)use of alterity in the service of patriotically vested ideologies.

#### REFUGEES, AMBIVALENT BORDERS, POROSITIES

The rise of neocolonialism updated traditional ways of exploitation to be practiced from the affluent northern areas of the globe to southern and eastern ones; but it also reshaped the old guises of exclusion to preclude the contamination of ethnocentric and nativist discourses by new forms of otherness. Once they have had their former paths “reversed in direction,” the old colonialist pressures spotlight immigrants and asylum seekers and, as

<sup>4</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 151.

<sup>5</sup> Nixon, 151.

<sup>6</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 292–321.

<sup>7</sup> Omar El Akkad, *American War* (London: Picador, 2017). Subsequent references are to the 2018 edition.

Bauman opines, “the rising role played by vague and diffuse ‘security fears’.”<sup>8</sup> When these fears become a priority of a nation-state, its weakness is as evident as its depoliticization since the state of exception reigns. These states’ fragility represents a “world planetary order,... in truth, the worst of all disorders.”<sup>9</sup> Governed by that Agambenian disorder of threats to the communal ethos in the midst of climate emergency, *American War* highlights the need to revise the ontology of nation-state political communities, one founded on the premise of nativity, which grants basic rights in terms of citizenship and on policies of belonging reliant on territorial grounds.<sup>10</sup> In the novel, refugees and their provisional location make them “the form and limit of the political community,” being then contaminated by the doubleness of the border as gate and boundary.<sup>11</sup>

That doubleness dramatically inflects the protagonist Sarat’s life and that of her family, as all of them are precariously included in, or radically excluded from, the national narrative dictated by the federal government. Sarat opposes the all-subsuming power of that narrative from the pages of her journals, which she donates to her nephew Benjamin. That account of the times of the second North-South civil war (2074–95), from her childhood as a camp refugee to her armed activism for the southern cause, culminates with her immolation while releasing a deadly chemical weapon in a terrorist attack during the 2095 ceremony of national reunification that officially ends the war. From late in the twenty-second century, the ancient historian Benjamin mediates the narration of his aunt, located in the central section of the novel, sandwiched between his first-person prologue and epilogue. From that position of authority, Benjamin crosses the border among the three structural sections of the novel and intends to set distance from the anti-American threat that Sarat embodies.

In *American War*, the community’s boundary is a multidimensional apparatus of control. On the one hand, the numerous borders in the novel discipline individuals and groups, while they also comply with a protective zeal for those enclosed within. On the other hand, border permeability exposes them to adjacency with the other to be walled off. The novel deploys a two-

<sup>8</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Über Sicherheit und Terror,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Sept. 20, 2001, 45; English translation by Soenke Zehle (2009), available at <https://publikationen.sulb.unisaarland>.

[de/bitstream/20.500.11880/23583/1/Agamben.pdf](https://publikationen.sulb.unisaarland/bitstream/20.500.11880/23583/1/Agamben.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights,” *Social Engineering* 15 (2008): 90.

<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “We Refugees”, *Symposium* 49, no. 2 (1995): 114.

fold dynamics of border building and border erasure, which dismantles the homogeneity expected in the making of a sovereign political community. In times of national crisis, such as the twenty-first-century civil war that frames the novel, the American self and the other are precariously set apart. Hence, the national narrative requires ongoing refigurations to ensure its survival.

However, an irresolute border-building strategy impedes the efficient conformation of the ghosted community. Border porosity unmasks the policies brandished to demonize unnational evils like migration or terrorism. To judge from Sarat's experience, the national subject and its abject other are Janus-faced, a problematic, diffuse duality also inscribed presently into American social opinion. Thus, while El Akkad affirms that he usually "obliterate[s] borders,"<sup>12</sup> a tendency he ascribes to "his little respect for the nation state,"<sup>13</sup> in his speech on winning the Iowa Caucus in January 2024, Republican Donald Trump promised "to seal the border" to stop the human flow that, in his opinion, averts American greatness and threatens the national way to progress.<sup>14</sup> In other words, borders may easily polarize the American national discourse, as they either turn into limits or thresholds, icons of enforced homogeneity, or tokens of multiplicity.

Border erasure depicts the fictional United States as raided by the evils that current Americans usually watch on news channels' foreign affairs coverage. First, the country is deprived of its historical prevalence to enable a primary trespassing of the inter/national divide and several subsequent role reversals: covert interventions in US domestic politics by global superpowers, China and the African Bouazizi Empire; social instability, climate emergency, and a massive volume of population under welfare. In that sense, the novel "extrapolates from our present moment the probable..., events that refugee crises precipitate."<sup>15</sup> When preceded by the word *refugee*, the term *crisis* veils the Western dislike for close otherness.<sup>16</sup> Embodied by refugees, that closeness challenges the political configuration of Western states'

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<sup>12</sup> Omar El Akkad, "Omar El Akkad sobre su segunda novela *Qué extraño paraíso*," *The Markaz Review* (October 25, 2021): 18.10.

<sup>13</sup> El Akkad, 18.43.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Trump, "'They want us to be great again': Trump Celebrates Victory in Iowa Caucus," *ANC 24/7*, January 15, 2024, 1:22.

<sup>15</sup> Lou Cornum and Maureen Moynagh, "Introduction: Decolonial (Re)Visions of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror," *Canadian Literature* 240 (2020): 16.

<sup>16</sup> Y-Dang Troeung and Phaniel Antwi, "'In This Very Uncertain Space': A Conversation with Omar El Akkad," *Canadian Literature* 240 (2020): 45.

sovereignty beyond a *state of emergency*,<sup>17</sup> itself the result of an inadequate “response to the crisis.”<sup>18</sup>

Migratory flows are domestic in *American War*, and move inland as the American Atlantic coast has been partially washed over by the ocean, the effect of global warming in recent decades. The aversion to these displaced nationals in the host territories pairs them with incoming foreigners, thus producing a further twist of the border, with the insider as outsider, and coalesces with the southern states’ opposition to the federal government’s plans to diminish the use of carbon and oil. Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas refuse to implement the Sustainable Futures Act and secede from the Union to later form the Free Southern State. The Act increases the social discontent among less industrialized southern states and ultimately captures the echoes of Latour’s and Nixon’s views on the inadequacy of an equally shared responsibility for the current Anthropocenic stage.

It is not incidental that the potential of human action is in the novel inextricably linked to the use of biological weapons and the ensuing responsibility. In this sense, while Sarat’s use of the lethal virus “the Quick” on Reunification Day may be interpreted as a final reclamation of her agency, a fierce opposition to the prevalence of the national narrative in her life, and that of the millions killed in the following decades, the federal government’s use of “the Slow” in the early years of the conflict heated up the domestic sphere. Its liberation in Carolina was meant to sever southern rebellion and visibilize those behind the national fracture. The physical walling of the state and the lockdown of the sick population cleaves the national political community: there are now “the People” and the other/s—i.e., “the people,” or a “fragmentary multiplicity of excluded bodies” in South Carolina’s Quarantine Zone.<sup>19</sup>

This border-building strategy exemplifies a split between “an inclusive concept” and an “exclusive” one “known to afford no hope,”<sup>20</sup> exclusion and lack of political agency propelling collective hopelessness. Thus, South

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Sabeen Ahmed and Lisa Madura, “Introduction,” in *Refugees Now: Rethinking Borders, Hospitality, and Citizenship*, edited by Kelly Oliver, Lisa M. Madura, and Sabeen Ahmed (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>20</sup> Agamben, 30.

Carolina became “a walled hospice,”<sup>21</sup> one reflecting the contention of the unnational, which is futile and spreads across the militarized barrier. Once depoliticized, South Carolinians are reduced to what may be described as Agambenian “bare life” and join coastal refugees as dwellers of a space of amnesia against whom the political sovereign community intends its self-legitimation.

A maze of newspaper clips, reports, or court hearings hardly lets readers track Sarat’s path while providing peripheral and contextual information. The misunderstanding that gives way to her name, which she eventually owns, already announces the shaky social relations that construct her diffuse identity within the space of amnesia that she is traversing in the novel: “The new kindergarten teacher accidentally read the girl’s middle initial as the last letter of her name.”<sup>22</sup> For her, “the name had a bite to it... Sarat snapped shut like a bear trap.”<sup>23</sup> And, as a bear that revolves against its immobilization, Sarat resists her own vulnerability and border condition, transforming the space of amnesia into an intended space of contestation. From that enclave, she defies the power of the national narrative to reify her subjectivity, and reclaims her political agency: from her protests against her childhood camp confinement to her involvement in southern military action.

Structurally speaking, nevertheless, the prologue and the central section of the novel undo their time and spatial boundaries, so as to reinforce Sarat’s amnesiac portrait. For all the personal testimony that the latter encompasses, its thematic centrality is displaced as the former lets readers know that what comes up next is a reconstruction out of Sarat’s journals. The third-person mediated subjectivity disperses as the author of that reconstruction announces his will to destroy the journals, thus placing Sarat again within the boundaries of the oblivion that she hardly leaves. That prologue is the scene in which, from well into the twenty-second century, the dying Benjamin, a former “refugee” from a no-longer-cold Alaska,<sup>24</sup> represents his aunt. Construed midway between the privacy of her journals and the public notoriety of her commitment to the Southern cause, Sarat easily becomes anti-American in the warlike federal discourse. In the late twenty-second century, during a post-reunification moment of continuous redefinition of borders, Benjamin composes a “story about... ruin,” physical and moral, while being

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<sup>21</sup> El Akkad, *American War*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> El Akkad, 10.

<sup>23</sup> El Akkad, 10.

<sup>24</sup> El Akkad, 3.

nostalgic for a time dangerously near our present.<sup>25</sup> As he claims, “My favorite postcards are from the 2030s and 2040s, the last decades before the planet turned on the country and the country turned on itself.”<sup>26</sup> His collection includes “pictures of the great ocean beaches before rising waters took them;... before the inland Exodus filled them with the coastal displaced. A visual reminder of America as it existed in the first half of the twenty-first century: soaring, roaring, oblivious.”<sup>27</sup>

Between that early America and that of Benjamin’s refugee childhood in Alaska—shortly after the plague caused by Sarat’s release of “the Quick” ravaged the country—the unchanged component is the manufacture of otherness for those inhabiting the national spaces of amnesia, where refugees blend with alien enemies. As Benjamin recalls,

on my days off I stood at the same docks alongside the mob, cursing the newest refugees.... I found myself contemptuous of the refugees’ presence in a city already overburdened.... We carried signs calling them terrorists and criminals.... It made me feel rooted; their unbelonging was proof of my belonging.<sup>28</sup>

Benjamin’s hatred for the refugees in town helps him construct a boundary stemming from the fear of disidentification provided by how the global trends of culture and economy “reshuffle people,” and, as Bauman holds, “play havoc with their social identities.”<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, citizens may rapidly turn into asylum seekers or refugees, as attested by the Chestnuts in *American War*. According to Bauman, “[w]e hate those people because we feel that what they are going through in front of our eyes may well prove to be, and soon, a dress rehearsal of our own fate.”<sup>30</sup> As the critic concludes: “Trying hard to remove them from our sight—round them up, lock them in camps, deport them—we wish to exorcise that spectre.”<sup>31</sup> In the novel, Sarat’s vital experience shows that she has been the object of that national exorcism.

Benjamin’s American foundations are cracked when he becomes the unwanted deposit of the most antipatriotic testimony. His inheritance of Sarat’s journals uncovers how Benjamin’s aunt plotted his kidnap and relocation in neutral territory, away from the plague and his parents. It also exposes Ben-

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<sup>25</sup> El Akkad, 6.

<sup>26</sup> El Akkad, 3.

<sup>27</sup> El Akkad, 3.

<sup>28</sup> El Akkad, 327.

<sup>29</sup> Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, 128.

<sup>30</sup> Bauman, 128.

<sup>31</sup> Bauman, 128.

jamin to the unbearable contamination from the terrorist other, one responsible for a ten-year pandemic in the United States plotted by international competitors. “I know because she told me. And my knowing makes me complicit,”<sup>32</sup> he explains to justify his resentment and destruction of his aunt’s war diaries, which would avoid any suspicion on his awareness of Sarat’s plans. “My secret is I still love her,”<sup>33</sup> Benjamin explains at the end of the Prologue, before sentencing Sarat’s writings and her life story once again to that space of amnesia that perpetuates the communal wellbeing. His reconstruction is never published, and the autobiographical documents on which he drew are destroyed after his reading, one of Benjamin’s inescapable chores before the last stage of his terminal cancer. “If I had wanted to, I could have sold them for a criminal sum to one of the many wealthy history buffs that collect civil war memorabilia.” However, Benjamin continues, “I couldn’t keep myself from burning them. It was the only way I had left to hurt her.”<sup>34</sup>

FORCEFUL BORDERS:  
FROM CAMP PATIENCE TO SUGARLOAF

In 2075, when the early echoes of war announced the disintegration of national unity, the infantile Sarat, her twin Dana, and their elder brother Simon spotted in the Mississippi debris a “waterlogged book.”<sup>35</sup> It contained new maps “with the edges of the land shaved off,” but also old ones in which “America looked bigger.”<sup>36</sup> Hardly do they register the human geography of waves of former U.S. citizens in search of a firm inscription as northerners or southerners. The Chestnuts are no exception to that national drift: Martina, the mother, notices the fragility of the bond among those areas that the old borders used to hold together: “Sometimes it seemed to [her] that there had never been a Union at all.”<sup>37</sup> For her, “some ... opportunistic party had drawn lines on a map where previously there were none.”<sup>38</sup> As a result,

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<sup>32</sup> El Akkad, *American War*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> El Akkad, 6.

<sup>34</sup> El Akkad, 332.

<sup>35</sup> El Akkad, 19.

<sup>36</sup> El Akkad, 19.

<sup>37</sup> El Akkad, 18.

<sup>38</sup> El Akkad, 18.



“a single country [was] fashioned from many different countries.”<sup>39</sup> The war now highlights reciprocal historical tensions and inequalities among the communities tied together.

Impelled by war poverty in Louisiana to apply for a work permit in the bordering northern states, Sarat’s father, Benjamin, is killed at the federal office in Baton Rouge by the self-detonation of a southern terrorist. The activist’s necropolitical attempt to punish and escape from the northern colonization,<sup>40</sup> as Sarat will do twenty years later in her search for agency and resistance, leaves the Chestnuts in a borderland zone regulated by war machines and self-assumed sovereignty in the hands of armed militia from both factions. With no survival means, the Chestnuts request admittance to the Mississippi Camp Patience, a microcosmos of denationalized individuals based on the exceptional functioning of the sovereign community in its restoration of social order. Upon arrival, the Chestnuts’ interstitial space between the North and the South disqualifies them from being easily accepted in the camp: “So we’re not Northerners because we’re from the South, and we’re not Southerners because we tried to move north,” Martina argues with the NGO Crescent Moon workers in the camp. “Tell me what we are then.”<sup>41</sup> Their newly denationalized status impedes their northern progress in an exceptional limitation of mobility to those born in the country, according to pre-Civil War lenses. And, “unlike her husband, who had sneaked into the country from Mexico as a child back when the flow of migrants still moved northward, [Martina] ... was born into the place she lived.”<sup>42</sup> However, her former U.S. origin now proves irrelevant as it also proves that “the growing dissociation of birth (bare life) and the nation-state is the new fact of politics in our day, and what we call camp is this disjunction.”<sup>43</sup>

Camp Patience is plagued by lives that lose their affiliations and rights since only citizens can be attributed rights and citizenship relies on northern nativity. Inmates, in turn, witness the legitimation of their disposability, as certified by those usually killed by the northern snipers nearby, and by Sarat’s whole existence, since, for Agamben, bare lives are “doomed to

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<sup>39</sup> El Akkad, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 31.

<sup>41</sup> El Akkad, *American War*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> El Akkad, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 175.

death.”<sup>44</sup> The camp, in turn, certifies that refugees are a “disquieting figure” for breaking the human-citizen and nativity-nationality equation.<sup>45</sup> Camp Patience exceptional inmates live on benefactors from across the globe whose “only visible output” is given in the form of “hulking aid ships full of blankets,”<sup>46</sup> thus materializing the inmates’ transformation from political entities into bodies to be cared for.<sup>47</sup> The camp gathers individuals in “ontological deprivation”: disidentified, cast out from common humanity, and with their acts disregarded as politically meaningless.<sup>48</sup> The geographical borders that the international aid crosses parallel the legal borders that the existence of the camp transgresses since, as Agamben states, “the camp is the space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule,”<sup>49</sup> and borders are demarcated out of the suspension of lawful frames.

The camp’s lack of juridical protection fertilizes the space of amnesia and biopower that Sarat personifies. When her ashamed mother expels her from their home tent after winning a dare in which she accepted delving into “a brown sludge of human waste”<sup>50</sup> known as Emerald Creek, Sarat is sheltered by the camp teacher, Albert Gaines. “I look for special people,”<sup>51</sup> he flatters Sarat, while her twin, Dana, warns her that Gaines recruits internees “dumb enough to strap on a farmer’s suit and blow themselves up outside some northern checkpoint.”<sup>52</sup> When the camp is massacred by militias, Sarat realizes her potential for the southern cause and, together with her offspring, turns out as an icon of the rebellion, is involved in weapon dealing, and becomes a sniper.

Once betrayed by Gaines, an agent subsidized by the Bouazizi coalition to kindle American civil unrest, Sarat is detained at Sugarloaf. There, she is accused of terrorism for her assassination of a federal general and stays unjudged and tortured with her citizen/human rights cancelled to reaffirm state

<sup>44</sup> Agamben, *Means without End*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Agamben, 20.

<sup>46</sup> El Akkad, *American War*, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Michel Agier, *On the Margins of the World: The Refugee Experience Today* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 49.

<sup>48</sup> Serena Parekh, “Beyond the Ethics of Admission: Statelessness, Refugee Camp, and Moral Obligations,” in *Refugees Now: Rethinking Borders, Hospitality, and Citizenship*, ed. Kelly Oliver, Lisa M. Madura, and Sabeen Ahmed (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 142.

<sup>49</sup> Agamben, *Means without End*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> El Akkad, *American War*, 83.

<sup>51</sup> El Akkad, 121.

<sup>52</sup> El Akkad, 151.

security.<sup>53</sup> The political community places her beyond its limits as a terrorist combatant, one that goes through a process of dehumanization essential for her abjection as the antinational non-subject. Jeffrey Clapp and Emily Ridge show that insecurity unveils the interdependence between the national self and the unknown other, making the dividing border porous.<sup>54</sup> As an evident threat, Sarat becomes a participant in “panic-related law making” indebted to the radicalization of otherness.<sup>55</sup> She becomes a powerless embodiment of negative vectors: her blackness, gender, lesbian sexual orientation, and even her large bodily constitution make her a target of sadistic torture justified in terms of her “enemy combatant” status, a new category of prisoner that “could and should be detained indefinitely” to reach an eventual national de-subjectification.<sup>56</sup> According to Bud, Sarat’s jailer, “I must have done some real terrible shit in my last life.... That’s got to be why I ended here, stuck playing babysitter to a cageful of goddamned animals.”<sup>57</sup> As Bud notices, torture reflects the acknowledgment of the impossibility of conceiving the body in isolation, but as part of relations of “dependency on other bodies and networks of support,”<sup>58</sup> like the southern cause. Torture involves the abuse of interdependency, but it also indicates the intention to cancel the significance of the body as the site of material ideological and political commitment.<sup>59</sup> That is the cause of Bud’s usual debasement of prisoners like Sarat. “‘You dumb Red dyke’... ‘We’re going to make you sing,’” Bud says. “Before she could turn her head, he slapped her across the face.”<sup>60</sup> After years of imprisonment to force her signature on a declaration admitting terrorism, Sarat undertakes a hunger strike, since “in starvation she found agency, control.”<sup>61</sup> However, she is forcefully revived by her jailers and doctors, which

<sup>53</sup> Sherene H. Razack, “Afterword: Race, Desire and Contemporary Security Discourses,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2009): 815.

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey Clapp and Emily Ridge, “Introduction: Risking Hospitality,” in *Security and Hospitality in Literature and Culture: Modern and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Jeffrey Clapp and Emily Ridge (New York: Routledge, 2016), 8.

<sup>55</sup> Terri Tomski, “Cosmopolitan Testimony: Engaging Radical Alterity on the Road to Guantanamo,” in *Security and Hospitality in Literature and Culture: Modern and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Jeffrey Clapp and Emily Ridge (New York: Routledge, 2016), 259.

<sup>56</sup> Tomski, “Cosmopolitan Testimony,” 259.

<sup>57</sup> El Akkad, *American War*, 255.

<sup>58</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), 61.

<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>60</sup> El Akkad, *American War*, 250.

<sup>61</sup> El Akkad, 253.

highlights her lack of control over her life or death, and the political need to prolong her existence. It is far from any humanitarian motivation since, as Butler says, the lives of detainees “do not count as the kind of ‘human lives’ protected by human rights discourse.”<sup>62</sup>

In 2094, the end of the war leads to Sarat’s release on an official non-liability declaration in favor of the federal government. The document endows her with a “No Longer Combatant” status,<sup>63</sup> which implies her viable transference from exceptional detention to the social, national sphere, one she shatters with her release of “the Quick.” To put it differently, Sarat has crossed the border once again to be admitted into the American community, an act of further discipline that she resists when, in Benjamin’s reconstruction, she murders eleven million reunified Americans. The ultimate oblivion act, however, is the denial of her official responsibility and historical agency.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Sara T. Chestnut embodies the whole refugee community when faced with the sovereignty of present-day political collectivity: living on the border for convenient in/exclusions and struggling for the materialization of her agency, which would imply a renewal of the paradigmatic forms in which the community grants participatory rights on the basis of nativity and territoriality. Sarat’s position is indebted to how the communal boundary is an apparatus of control, here exacerbated by the civil war. The need to reconfigure the border in an ongoing form helps to discipline individuals and groups, forcing claims of homogeneity against their non-subjectivity. The exception that the community requires and implements, as an order-building strategy *vis-a-vis* presumed external threats, is visible in the dramatization of camp refugeehood and detention on the basis of state security. Sarat’s eventual disappearance, after having survived both experiences, returns her to the space of amnesia designed for ghosted communities, where her mirage of activist agency vanishes, burnt by Benjamin. Although in a realm of amnesia, Sarat’s story is that of an anti-heroine, yet able to interrogate the mastery of historical interpretation in the hands of the nation-state, as readers are encouraged into ethical spaces from which to be suspicious of the vested use of alterity.

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<sup>62</sup> Butler, *Frames of War*, 58.

<sup>63</sup> El Akkad, *American War*, 258.

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BORDERS, REFUGEES, AND SPACES OF AMNESIA:  
OMAR EL AKKAD'S *AMERICAN WAR*

Summary

This paper examines Omar El Akkad's novel *American War* to highlight climate and war refugees as a "ghosted community" strategically placed within what Rob Nixon terms a "space of amnesia," and to later configure a mirror of otherness able to return to the political community a predication of its homogeneity. Then, as nation-state-centred discourses of patriotism are challenged by the making and unmaking of borders in the novel, attention is paid to the attempt to monitor the spaces of adjacency. The confinement of refugees in camps and the existence of detention centres to annihilate contemporary threats embodied in the terrorist combatant illustrate how political sovereignty relies on borders created on exemption. The multiplicity of narratives coalescing in the novel around Sara T. Chestnut helps interrogate the sovereignty that the nation-state claims over historical interpretation, while readers are invited into new spaces of ethical compromise to detect the (mis)use of alterity in the service of patriotically vested ideologies.

**Keywords:** borders; refugees; spaces of amnesia; *American War*; Omar El Akkad

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GRANICE, UCHODŹCY I PRZESTRZENIE AMNEZJI  
W POWIEŚCI *AMERYKA W OGNIU* OMARA EL AKKADA

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje powieść *Ameryka w ogniu* Omara El Akkada ukazującą uchodźców klimatycznych i wojennych jako „społeczność duchów”, strategicznie umieszczoną w miejscu, które Rob Nixon definiuje jako „przestrzeń amnezji” społeczności dominującej. Owa przestrzeń uznana jest za niezbędną do utrzymania homogenicznej tożsamości danej społeczności. Powieść podważa dyskurs skoncentrowany na państwie narodowym, ukazując obozy dla uchodźców i ośrodki detencyjne stworzone do walki z terroryzmem jako narzędzia legitymizujące walkę o polityczną suwerenność Stanów Zjednoczonych, opartą na ustanowieniu i obronie granic wprowadzonych poprzez strategię wykluczania. Różnorodność narracji skupiających się w powieści wokół postaci Sary T. Chestnut kwestionuje nie tylko sposób budowania suwerenności politycznej kraju, ale i tworzenia jednolitej narodowej narracji historycznej. Zestawiając opowieść rodziny Chestnutów z narzucaną historią kraju, Akkad otwiera czytelnikowi przestrzeń do refleksji na temat (nie)właściwego wykorzystania odmienności na potrzeby patriotycznej ideologii państwa narodowego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** granice; uchodźcy; przestrzeń amnezji; *Ameryka w ogniu*; Omar El Akkad