

Make America small again: the ruins of petroculture in Omar El Akkad's *American War*

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Abstract: This article discusses the manner in which Omar El-Akkad's dystopian novel *American War* (2017) portrays the future civilizational decline of the American South, which is embroiled in a second civil war against the North in the aftermath of environmental transformations and climate insecurity that had prompted the federal government to outlaw the use of fossil fuels. My analysis focuses on the representation of the United States as a declining petroculture and on the attempts by the seceding South to preserve their fossil fuel-based economy and way of life at the expense of millions of lives and a heavily receding landscape. I argue that, by looking at the conflict through the lens of the more recent war on terror, not only does the narrative bring home the societal breakdown in the Middle East, similarly driven by the glorification of oil and by heavy militarization, but it also forces Americans in the position of the radicalized displaced people from heretofore remote corners of the world.

Keywords: (civil) war; petroculture; ruin(s); climate change; fossil fuels.



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“This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war and hate ...”
(Madeleine L’Engle, “The Risk of Birth”)

“This is what war *does*. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates.
War scorches. War dismembers. War *ruins*.”
(Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, emphasis in the original)

“Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant to step the ocean and crush
us at a blow? Never! [...] At what point then is the approach of danger to be
expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot
come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author
and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time or die by
suicide.” (Abraham Lincoln’s Lyceum Address, 1838)

Introduction: the future is dystopian

In his work on cultural and political utopianism, Tom Moylan observes that “we live in conjecturally dystopian times” marked by “catastrophic ecological destruction, increasing economic exploitation, constant war, intensifying impoverishment and displacement of peoples, and pervasive racism and xenophobia” (129). Given these “fraught and fractious times,” it appears tempting to read any dystopian novel as “a kind of nonfiction in waiting, a pre-journalism of the future” (Cronin n. pg.). Intimately bound up with the culture and politics of its day, dystopian writing brings past, present, and future together. While “grounded in the anxieties of the present, it speculates on the future consequences of current events and actions” (Martinez-Falquina 270), especially if nothing is done to hinder or derail their course.

The adjective ‘dystopian’ implies “fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail” (Claeys 5). Such narratives foreground “landscapes defined by ruin, death, destruction” and scattered with “swollen corpses, derelict buildings, submerged monuments, decaying cities, wastelands, the rubble of collapsed civilizations” (Claeys 3). They read as extreme, and most often generalized, versions of current disasters, plights, wars, social and political disorder, individual and collective pain and suffering. As Eva Horn’s *The Future as Catastrophe* argues, the “bleak underlying feeling today is that the continuation of the present will inevitably lead to a radical break or collapse. No one knows, however, exactly how this will come about” (16).

Omar El Akkad’s dystopian debut novel *American War* (2017) advances one scenario for the end of the world as we know it. It describes a second civil war in the American South against the background of an environmental disaster in the distant future that has left the country with great territorial losses and millions of internally displaced citizens. In a reversal of the current state of affairs, the narrative visits on the American people the cruel realities of war, mass violence, and suffering that citizens in remote corners of the world experience on a regular basis: drone strikes, suicide bombings, guerilla violence, and extreme acts of torture. By looking at the armed conflict in the American South through the lens of the war on terror and imagining what would happen

if the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were brought home, the novel seemingly attempts to “close the cognitive gap between America and the Middle East” (O’Toole n. pg.) and prove that ultimately “the misery of war represents the world’s only truly universal language” (El Akkad 184).

My analysis of El Akkad’s narrative focuses on representations of ruins and ruination. It has been noted that “when we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future” (Woodward 11), as they remind us, “in a very sublime way, of the inevitability of human extinction, refocusing the terrain of ‘ruin’ away from the ancient world and towards the imminent future” (Lyons 1). Moreover, contemporary ruins “cannot be disassociated from irreversible ecological devastation” (Ibata 5) triggered by the practices and products of anthropocentric capitalism. Andreas Huyssen observes that a “cult of ruins” has accompanied Western civilization at least from the eighteenth century onward, but the recent “strange obsession with ruins” has developed especially in the northern transatlantic countries “as part of a much broader discourse about memory and trauma, genocide and war” (7).

Within this context, the United States “has long been haunted by premonitions of decline, by memento mori of fallen empires real and imagined” (Puglionesi 5). My discussion looks at how the novel envisages the collapse of the American giant, a nation no longer recognizable, at that future point in time, for its greatness and global leadership, but for the level of devastation brought about by climate change, rising seas and submerged geographical contours, compounded by a protracted civil war which decimated its population on both sides of the ideological divide and by a biological disaster that further wiped out a great part of the remaining survivors. I argue that the narrative is not just a cautionary tale about unchecked factionalism and a domestic adaptation of the wars waged by the United States in remote corners of the world, but also a study on the psychology of war and an exploration of the effects of armed conflict at the immediate level of those caught in the crossfire, who become radicalized perpetrators of extreme (mass) violence in their turn.

The state of the union is shattered

A decade and a half ago, the American satire magazine *The Onion*, which ridicules newsmakers and current events, decried the major environmental catastrophe triggered by the fact that millions of barrels of dangerous crude oil *safely* reached the intended port in Louisiana. At the end of its successful journey to the American shores, the large quantity of the “black, toxic petroleum in the ship’s hold” was unloaded into special containers and later on distributed across the country, bound to “commit unforetold damage to its lakes, streams, and air” (“Millions of Barrels” n. pg.). Experts were cited emphasizing the dire ecological consequences of the ‘catastrophe’: “rising temperatures, disappearing shorelines, the eradication of countless species, extreme weather events, complete economic collapse, droughts that surpass the Dust Bowl, disease, wildfires, widespread human starvation, and endless, bloody wars fought over increasingly scarce resources” (“Millions of Barrels” n. pg.). And while politicians promised that those responsible for the gallons of oil reaching the American people would be held accountable,

representatives from ExxonMobil, BP, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Chevron denied responsibility for the disaster.

Published in the aftermath of the disastrous Deepwater Horizon oil spill off the coast of the United States at the beginning of 2010, the largest in the country's history, the parodic article showed that even when crude did not spill to devastate wildlife or soil marshes and beaches, it was still sure to have irreversible harmful effects on the environment and living beings, which however went mostly unacknowledged in absence of immediate, catastrophic events stealing the limelight. Thus, while the Horizon accident was undoubtedly a local catastrophe, the oil that has ever traveled without incident from the points of extraction to refineries and markets across the globe has contributed massively to global warming and its contemporary dire consequences.

Written in part as a rebuke to the same current policies regarding the unchecked use of fossil fuels across the industrialized world that *The Onion* skewered in their article, El Akkad's novel was published with an eye on the first Trump administration, well-known, among others, for its systematic denial of man-made climate change and its long-term implications for life on the planet. Back then, as in present times, Trump officials seemed poised to reverse policies and initiatives meant to cap the use of fossil fuels, particularly oil, and to prevent the country from moving towards more sustainable, renewable forms of energy. Indeed, some of the more prominent measures with an immediate impact on both domestic and international environmental and climate policy of the Trump White House included cutting funds for programs under the Clean Air Act, withdrawing the country from the Paris agreement, which promotes the global reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, removing protections for wildlife and their habitat, rejecting bans on pesticides (see Popovich et al.), deregulating the building of oil and gas pipelines in a self-declared attempt at "ushering in the new era of American energy" and ultimately reversing "stifling policies put in place by the previous administration that were holding back our country from achieving energy dominance" ("President Donald J. Trump Is Unleashing American Energy Dominance" n. pg.).

The narrative takes this American commitment to the use of fossil fuels several steps further and turns it into grounds for a second Civil War. In doing so, it highlights the civilizational decline triggered by the ravages of war and extreme environmental decay to the point that "[t]his isn't a story about war. It's about ruin" (El Akkad 6).

It has been observed that, chiefly due to the potential fallout of extreme climate change and unpredictable ecological decay, in the twenty-first century ruins have become astute symbols of the future, "visible in the landscapes destroyed by mining or the toxic waste of manufacturing; and visible as well in the devastating alterations of the landscape" (Orvell 207). Given the "accelerated processes of ruination in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries", ruins have to be "experienced by the generations that produce them", which means that when it comes to contemporary ruins, "questions about the future of humanity seem to prevail over retrospective perspectives" (Ibata 4). Ruins no longer embody the romantic "majesty and dignity of history" or the cultural prestige of the past, they do not even appear as the "necessary concomitant of progress" like in the early twentieth century. (Orvell x) On the contrary, the unprecedented brutality and destruction of the last half a century has led to the creation of "new ruins", characterized

by a lingering “smell of fire and mortality” (DeSilvey and Edensor 466), to the extent that decay and dereliction have become a hallmark of “the perpetual state of ruins that we now inhabit” (Orvell 207). At the same time, the contemporary obsession with ruination also seemingly “hides a nostalgia for an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures” (Huysen 7).

In her volume dedicated to the American Civil War of mid-nineteenth century, Megan Kate Nelson argues that “[w]ithout ... ruins, we cannot fully understand the terrifying nature of wartime violence and the complex and contradictory nation that it created.” (*Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* 239) As if taking up on Nelson’s observation, El Akkad’s dystopian narrative explores the scope and specificity of ruination brought about by an imagined second nation-wide conflict between the Reds and the Blues in the decades following the year 2075. The novel foregrounds the civilizational ruin of the United States, a far cry from its glory days as a world superpower, as well as its concomitant decline as a petroculture, still clinging against all hope to its once flourishing fossil fuel-based culture and lifestyle. Tracing an all-encompassing “landscape of loss” (Weik von Mossner 629) – of land, home, family, and ultimately life – and proving that “how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked” (Gaard 158), *American War* similarly delves into the consequences of environmental collapse and the profound alteration of the landscape. It also explores the physical and psychological ruination of human lives that ultimately leads to the radicalization of the protagonist and to her turning into a self-sufficient and self-sacrificing terrorist.

American War fuses together defining characteristics and challenges of our present times: factionalism and global conflict, violence and torture, (domestic) terrorism, squalid and overcrowded refugee internment camps, deadly plagues and environmental breakdown. Only this time, the effects of conflict and mass suffering are brought home, to the heartland of what is left of the North-American continent in the second half of the twenty-first century. And as we learn that the 2030s and 2040s were “the last decades before the planet turned on the country and the country turned on itself” (El Akkad 3), it soon becomes glaringly obvious that the America of the first half of the 21st century, “soaring, roaring, oblivious” (3) is gone. In its stead, there’s a new America, smaller and resentful.

As the map at the beginning of the novel ominously lays bare, by 2075 major areas of the country have been submerged by rising sea levels and low-lying coastal cities on both sides have vanished. In line with current predictions, which estimate that in the following three decades Louisiana stands to lose a football field of land every 90 minutes (Mulhern n. pg.), this part of the country is also mostly under water as “the sea’s mouth opened wide over ruined marshland, and every year grew wider, the water picking away at the silt and sand and clay ... The water swallowed the land. To the southeast, the once glorious city of New Orleans became a well within the walls of its levees.” (El Akkad 9) As the encroaching seas started gnawing at the shores, the government built “hundreds of miles of seawalls, levees, raised causeways, and even, toward the end, floating towns” back when “the oceans had not yet devoured the optimistic notion that with enough

concrete and dirt and pride and money the low country could be saved” (El Akkad 55). But a couple of decades later, all that was still left standing were

the entrails of that long-subsumed world and the futile efforts to preserve it: thin strips of asphalt that disappeared at high tide, ghost towns propped on man-made hills, crumbling bridges that nosedived into the water. Scattered among the islands that remained, these things stood as ruins and like all ruins were in their own way grotesque, a transgression against the passage of time. (55)

To make matters worse, the country faced other major (territorial) challenges as well, which revealed that “there had always been fissures” (El Akkad 17) in the American land. The inhabitants of the Northwest “were constantly threatening to declare the independence of the proud, pacifist Cascadia¹”, while south of Cascadia the territories of California, Nevada, Arizona and West Texas had fallen once more under the authority of the Mexican forces, “the map of that corner of the continent slowly reverting to what it was hundreds of years ago” (17). In their turn, the “old-stock nativists” of the Midwest could barely restrain their animosity towards their fellow Americans turned into “millions of coastal refugees who descended onto the middle of the country to escape rising seas and severe storms” (17). And the South decided once more that protecting their sources of energy and their lifestyle was well worth going to war for and thus “sever[ed] itself from the Union rather than stop using that illicit fuel responsible for so much of the country’s misfortune” (17). Looking back from this ruinous future, Sarat Chestnut, the novel’s protagonist, concludes at one point that “[i]n the old maps America looked bigger” (19).

What prompted the South to secede from the country this time around was their refusal to adhere to the Sustainable Future Act, under which Congress outlawed fossil fuel in order to counter environmental catastrophe and to signal the waning economic importance of non-renewable energy sources. The states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia (the MAG) and Texas (prior to the subsequent Mexican annexation) secede and form the Free Southern State, while rebellious South Carolina is brought to its knees early in the war when a plague is released by Union agents to quench the people’s revolt there, turning them all into a “forest of living dead” (El Akkad 111). It is subsequently walled off to protect the rest of the country and “the rebel state whose induced coma turned the tide for the Blues was now a glaring embarrassment, the shame of a nation” (94). When a secessionist suicide bomber assassinates the President – thus reaching mythical status among her people in the South and lending her name to a symbolically powerful weapon – the country goes to war against itself for decades to come, forever altering the course of

¹ The name given to the Northwest trans-border bio-cultural region which includes all or parts of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Alaska, British Columbia and Alberta (<https://cascadiabioregion.org/facts-and-figures> – accessed 1 Sept. 2025). Currently, Cascadia is more of an “abstraction, an imaginary binational construct” for visionaries in the Pacific Northwest, who believe that in today’s highly interconnected world, “global economic logic and environmental and social interdependencies require regionalist approaches and solutions.” (Alper 2; 4)

this once-great world superpower. As Stephen Marche observed, “[w]hen you murder a president, you murder an America that should have been. ... It’s the fastest way to change history” (*The Next Civil War* 62).

The internal struggles of the United States are compounded by the precipitous decline of its position on the global scale. In the novel’s imagined future, the fifth attempt at an ‘Arab Spring’ has succeeded and the Bouazizi Empire – a unified Middle East – is now a world great superpower. It is also one of the main suppliers of the American South, where “[s]ince the earliest days of the civil war, the secessionist states survived on the charity of foreign superpowers” and “came to rely more and more on the massive ships that arrived every month from the other side of the planet stocked with food, clothing, and other human necessities” (El Akkad 25). The situation is similarly dire across the Atlantic as “fleets of ragged little boats headed southward from the European shore” (118) seek refuge in North Africa, now part of the Bouazizi Empire, with millions of citizens fleeing the old continent to save themselves.

In an analogy with the militarization of the Middle East and American intervention in the last decades of the previous century, the Bouazizis are funneling both money and weapons to the rebel armies in the South in order to keep the Reds and the Blues engaged in this protracted war and thus prevent the US from ever recovering. The following excerpt captures Sarat’s realization that the fascinating, dark-minded man who had given her both the will and the means to fight against the American government had been a Bouazizi agent all along:

‘My people have created an empire. It is young now, but we intend it to be the most powerful empire in the world. For that to happen, other empires must fall. I think by now you understand that, if it were the other way around – if the South was on the verge of winning – perhaps I would be having this conversation in Pittsburgh or Columbus.’ . . .
Sarat smiled at the thought. ‘You couldn’t just let us kill ourselves in peace, could you?’ (El Akkad 306)

This seems reminiscent of the pattern of destabilization, violence and insecurity that the US arguably propped up in the Persian Gulf starting with the 1970s when it provided oil autocrats in the region with access to weapons, tilting the fragile political balance in favor of friendly authoritarian regimes by positioning them as “surrogates for American interests and power” (Jones 212). Soon regional leaders were at war with each other and the US was selling weapons to several of them, contributing to the hypermilitarization of the area, to an increase in strife and to a drawn-out conflict among the Persian Gulf states. By the mid-1970s, the American notion of security in the region “was based almost entirely on the ability of oil producers to purchase the machines of war” (Jones 213). With this ironic shift in the poles of power, the novel arguably “turned the petro-geographical situation around and projected the chaos that the Americans caused in the Middle East back onto America” (Irttenkauf n. pg.). A major victory in this respect is attained when Sarat, radicalized by the manipulative Bouazizi agent, infiltrates the Reunification ceremony that was supposed to mark the end of the civil war and

releases a biological agent which wipes out one hundred million Americans and further cripples the nation for decades to come: “[b]y the time the plague ended, the country was in a ruinous state, and so many of the source materials on which a historian might rely to piece together the past were lost forever” (El Akkad 328).

The (un)making of an American terrorist

Sarat Chestnut is the character study at the heart of the novel and her family’s ruination parallels that of the country, revealing the devastating consequences of national collapse and the costs of war at the immediate level of ordinary civilians. Born in a poor family in flood-ridden Louisiana, Sarat is six when the war breaks out and she loses her father to a suicide bombing while he was seeking employment to relocate his family to the North. She subsequently ends up with her mother and two siblings in the ironically named Camp Patience, a refugee camp near the Tennessee border, right in the “festering heart of war-torn South” (El Akkad 46), nothing short of an “endless expanse of thick canvas tents, teeming with displaced life” (62) and heavily guarded by armed Northern snipers shooting anyone attempting to cross the demarcation lines. Here she is gradually indoctrinated by a charismatic scholarly-figure in search for “special people – people who, if given the chance and the necessary tools, would stand up and face the enemy on behalf of those who can’t” (121). This American veteran and undercover Bouazizi agent becomes her mentor, manipulates her anger and channels her thirst for revenge to satisfy his own agenda by eventually turning her into a deadly weapon against her co-nationals: “there existed no soldier as efficient, as coldly unburdened by fear, as a child broken early” (180).

The point of no return in this making of an American terrorist is marked by a Northern militiamen’s midnight attack on the refugee camp. The death of her mother, her brother’s head injury, which leaves him mentally impaired for life, and the gruesome massacre of the residents of Camp Patience represents the catalyst of her ruination and fall into extremism as a Southern combatant. Arguably from this moment onward, Sarat leads her life (em)powered by a strong desire to bring to ruin those who have ruined her and the novel becomes a study of her psychological undoing:

Onto the tin cans her mind painted the faces of those Northerners that night in Patience, and at the hallucinated sight of them she was overcome by anger and a rabid desire to ruin those who’d ruined her. Rage wrapped itself around her like a tourniquet, keeping her alive even as it condemned a part of her to atrophy. (El Akkad 189)

By turning “her attention to the only thing that still mattered: revenge, the unsettled score” (El Akkad 189), the novel’s heroine proves that there is deep meaning and satisfaction in taking up arms for your cause. This can be read as an illustration of what Elisabeth Jean Wood calls the ‘pleasure of agency’. Writing about the collective action of El Salvadorian peasants in support of the insurgent army waging war against the state from mid-1970s to the 1980s, Wood observes that in spite of the extraordinarily high risk

of doing so, they “took pride, indeed pleasure, in the successful assertion of their interests and identity” (*Insurgent Collective Action* 18). Underlying their rise to a mass movement was, she argues, the “value they put on being part of the making of history” (Wood 19).

Sarat seems similarly driven by an inescapable desire to leave her mark on behalf of those aggrieved by the American government in Columbus: “the enemy had violated her people, and for that she would violate the enemy. There could be no other way, she knew it. Blood can never be unspilled” (El Akkad 204). Barely 17, she lives on the move as an insurgent in the South and manages to kill a high-ranking general of the Northern Union with her own rifle, named Templestowe, “after the first true rebel of the Second Civil War, the girl who’d killed the crooked Union president in Jackson” (190). The Northern crackdown in the aftermath sees Sarat imprisoned for several years at Sugarloaf, “an artificial island of stone and concrete, rounded and circled with high razor-wire fencing” (245) in the Florida Sea – a Guantánamo-like facility where she is tortured for long periods of time and waterboarded just like the presumed Al Qaeda members in the aftermath of 9/11. Here “women were kept in cages while the camps were reordered and their male captives segregated. The cages were small and the taller detainees could not stand without crouching” (245). When the war ended several years later and Sarat was released, she left Sugarloaf an angry, embittered and ruined woman, both physically and mentally, and just like that “the girl whose soul the thick-necked guard had slowly strangled was gone” (247).

Sarat’s ultimately apolitical desire for vengeance did not end with the war. As one of the South’s last remaining rebels, she becomes the self-sacrificing agent who infiltrates the Union capital on Reunification Day to “unleash the sickness that cast the country into a decade of death” (El Akkad 4) and killed over one hundred million of its people. Sarat thus becomes the novel’s test case for how individuals can be radicalized in detention facilities and prison camps, in an apparent critique of American practices during the two-decade-long ‘war on terror’ following the September 11 attacks, informed by Omar El Akkad’s experience as a journalist reporting from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Guantánamo. An excerpt apparently taken from the “diary of a former Southern recruiter” confirms that

it was like a snake eating its own tail – by the time they got around to emptying those detention camps, they’d already turned most of the people into exactly what they’d needed them to be in the first place. I always said the camps at Sugarloaf were the best recruiters the South ever had. (El Akkad 260)

Prisons are known for being fertile grounds for “extremist radicalization and recruitment” (Basra and Neumann 30), as the experience of incarceration brings about a profound personal crisis for the individual that shatters their identity, exposes them to constant hostility and to tribalism, renders them mentally and physically vulnerable and provides so-called ‘cognitive openings’ – “the willingness and desire to identify with new ideas, beliefs, and social groups” (30) once their own long-held convictions are challenged by far-reaching life changes. Furthermore, the inmates’ criminal pasts arguably demonstrate their proclivity for law-breaking and violence, which turns them

into ideal recruits in search for opportunities to prove their worth. Thus, stripped of everything she once held dear and given the terrible chance to express her agency one final time, Sarat becomes the foreign conspirators' most prized biological weapon and inflicts on the nation the same degree of ruination as the one marking her own destiny.

Conclusion

In the last few decades, ostensible threats regarding the decline of resources, climate change and environmental collapse, the unchecked development of technology and media giants, the excesses of capitalism and the deepening of the economic divide, hyper-surveillance and political authoritarianism, the worldwide spread of terrorism and sectarian conflict, old and new forms of warfare, speak to the dystopian spirit of our times. More and more confronted with the ephemerality of our civilization and to the futility of all human endeavors, we look to ruins as symbols not only of our past but also of our future. Omar El Akkad's narrative imagines a future United States ruined by "a bloody fight over their stubborn commitment to a ruinous fuel" (El Akkad 279), indeed the very symbol of our modern age and the driving force of our progress and development. In typical dystopian fashion, the novel projects extreme versions of current debates and ideological clashes onto a seemingly hopeless future in order to try and avert the catastrophe it describes. It also acts as a reminder of how empires fall and of the vulnerability of freedom and democracy.

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