Q&A: The Worldly Astronaut, Marcus Yam

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The smell of burning rubber and smoke filled the Palestinian air. For every rock thrown over the fence separating Gaza from the Israeli Defense Force, two or three bullets were fired and hit their targets. Marcus Yam had never seen so many people shot in his life. But, oddly, Yam found peace in the ongoing protests.

Working almost 10 years at the for the Los Angeles Times, Yam never saw himself in the position he is in now. Once aspiring to land on the moon, Yam now travels the world as a photojournalist capturing moments in history from Mexican vanilla to wars.

Journalism student Margot Murphy conversed in detail with Yam regarding his experiences on the impacts of war and photojournalism. The conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: What made you switch from being an aerospace engineer to a photojournalist?

A: I started off going to school for aerospace engineering and I picked up a camera because I needed English credits to graduate. I'd never done photography before, but I learned it quickly because I was adept in electronics. An editor at the Buffalo News, John Davis, noticed my work and offered me an internship. He convinced me to try photojournalism as a profession. It felt as though the planets were aligning and I went, oh, this is what I'm supposed to be doing in my life.

Q: Why become a war correspondent?

A: I don't think I set out to become a war correspondent or a person that covers conflict in general. I started to dabble into breaking news, but I was more of a feature photographer. But I was sent to Gaza to cover The Great March of Return. During the biggest day of protests, I'd never seen so many people shot in my life.

I felt this moment of Zen, like serenity in the chaos. I was in the zone. I told my editor, Alan Hackman, about it and he knew that I had reached the space in your head where you can operate with no distractions. It was that war that made me realize I could cover wars.

Q: How has war affected you professionally and personally?

A: Professionally, it's shaped me in a way where I have this incredible job that doesn't exist in most publications. The L.A. Times created this job for me and it's paid off. Something they said to me was that, when the right war came along, I was already a 'blade that's been sharpened,

tested, proven.' I've made a name out of consistently surviving in the harsh environments, being uncomfortable and working constantly. I'm so hungry to make something, not just good, but excellent. I refuse to accept good.

Personally, I learned that I belonged in this world much more than I did in America. When I was in the States, I've always felt like the other: being an immigrant and a person of color. I never felt like I quite belonged, even in all the newsrooms I worked in. But this otherness that I felt, is what I tap into while overseas. I don't feel strange anymore, it gives me a sense of comfort and the acute ability to observe, compare and learn.

Q: One of your pieces, "The Taliban is back -- Afghan women are scared, but defiant," you emphasized hiding the identity of your interviewees in your photos. What was your process of creating this story?

A: One of my sources, Sahar, told me that I ought to do this story, because women would lose the most with the Taliban's return. All the progress they've made, everything would be all gone in a year or two. So, I picked locations where I could interview them in private where the women felt comfortable. I tried to never meet them at home, because it's likely the neighbors were watching. I was running around, turning off my phone to not get tracked. It was very cloak and dagger. I prioritized the interview over the pictures, leaving only a couple minutes to take pictures.

The policewoman, Lida, I only had three minutes to photograph. When the interview ended I posed her, showed her the image and then ran off. I had no guarantee I would see her again. Lida is the only source I haven't kept in touch with because she snapped her SIM cards afterwards. She disappeared, I have no idea where she is today.

Q: You never wanted to be a war correspondent, but you are quite acclaimed, such as receiving a Pulitzer Prize in 2022. How do you feel about that?

A: It wasn't about scaling or winning. It was more about acknowledging where I'm from and thinking about the likelihood of somebody like me succeeding in his business. As a person of color, a part of a minority, an immigrant, someone who almost dropped out of high school, everything like at that moment felt powerful to me.

But ultimately, I woke up the next day. Guess what I find in my inbox? Credit card bills. And I'm back on Earth again. I don't talk about the prize very much, I'd like to be read as someone quirky, funny and interesting.

Q: What does photojournalism and war mean to you?

A: Photojournalists are always the first audiences of war. Robert Capa encapsulates the archetype of war photographers with the quote, 'if your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close

enough.’ Rather, I think it's about being close at heart. You don't have to be physically close to the action, it's incredibly unwise and unsafe. I believe that photojournalists are responsible for constantly documenting. I hope that photographers continue to do this work and cover difficult things like conflict.

One of my photo-mentors, Ángel Franco, taught me to shoot with your heart, not with your eyes. Don't just look around and photograph things. Feel your way through a scene and ask people questions. Sometimes eyes don't tell you the truth.