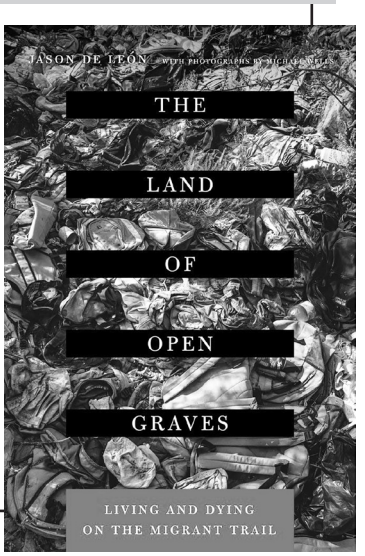
Accessible Anthropology

Abigail Mack &
Mark A. Stevenson

A Conversation with Jason De León



Jason De León is Professor of Anthropology and Chicana/o Studies and Director of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is also the founding executive director of the Undocumented Migration Project, a research, arts, and education collective that seeks to raise awareness about migration issues globally while also assisting families of missing migrants to be reunited with their loved ones.

A 2017 MacArthur Fellow, De León is the author of the award-winning book The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail *(2015), a trailblazing work on the human toll of undocumented migration in the U.S. borderlands of the Sonoran Desert, combining archaeological and ethnographic methods to document life and death on the migrant trail. De León's innovative work breaks new ground in combining all the tools of anthropology to create a gripping and profoundly moving account of the violence faced by migrants as a result of border policies. His latest book,* Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling *(2024), is the result of years-long ethnographic fieldwork among migrant smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico border, providing a unique and harrowing account of the actors behind the human smuggling industry. It won the 2024 National Book Award for Nonfiction.*

Abigail Mack (AM) *People often respond defensively when it comes to critiques of any institution they may align with or support. It translates productive critiques into something else: instead of reading what is actually there, the person assumes the critique is an attack on their community – on themselves – in a way that is really unproductive. I'm thinking about potential negative responses to your analyses of border policies – can you reflect on some of those responses?*

Part of it, too, is that some people have never had to question a system, especially if that system works for them. If you've never had a problem with something like police brutality, when it's brought up, it's easy to say, "Well, that's not been my experience." Somehow, questioning those things becomes "un-American." Or, the idea that the law is the law, and if you're breaking that law, then you are ***obviously*** in the wrong. We have a long history of laws that were unjust. I think it's hard for people to think about that and ask, "Oh, am I living in the Jim Crow era, but a different version of it?" I tell students, "I'm not here to change your mind. I'm just here to give you something to think about in a different way and give you some more information. If you walk away and you still hate migrants, or whatever it is, at least you know more about it; at least you have a better understanding of this thing, even if our interpretations don't align." There is this fear that "You're trying to brainwash me; you're trying to indoctrinate me." And to that I say, "All I can show you is what I know; this is a learning process for both of us." For some students, it's the first time they are dealing with some of these issues. If you haven't gone far from home, you don't really know that most of the world suffers in all kinds of ways.

Mark A. Stevenson (MS) *How have you seen the way immigration is talked about shifting since you started doing this work? It doesn't seem to have evolved in any particularly productive direction. And when you add political polarization into the mix – which is the shorthand for a lot of things going on right now – how much harder is it for you to engage in that work in terms of research and teaching?*

For a long time, I was always trying to drive home to folks—maybe in more subtle ways—that this is not a Republican issue or a Democratic issue. Democrats are equally as dirty in this whole process. President Biden is making it very clear that this issue tran-

Some people have never had to question a system, especially if that system works for them. If you've never had a problem with something like police brutality, when it's brought up, it's easy to say, "Well, that's not been my experience." Somehow, questioning those things becomes "un-American." Or, the idea that the law is the law, and if you're breaking that law, then you are obviously *in the wrong. We have a long history of laws that were unjust. I think it's hard for people to think about that and ask, "Oh, am I living in the Jim Crow era, but a different version of it?" I tell students, "I'm not here to change your mind. I'm just here to give you something to think about in a different way and give you some more information."*

scends political parties. In some ways, it has made it easier for me to make some of these arguments. Nothing has changed for the good; but I never expected it to either. Same thing is going on, and I'll keep doing what I'm doing. All I can do is try to educate. People can do whatever they want with that information. President Trump helped me realize that there was so much wasted energy around the Thanksgiving dinner table. For a time, I was convinced that if people only knew how much others suffered, then they would feel differently, but no, clearly not. I tell students I just walk away from those situations. There are some conversations I just can't have anymore. I'd rather focus on people who just have questions. It's a "meet the new boss, the same as the old boss" kind of thing.

(AM) *My anthropology students are really excited about doing anthropology, about writing in a way that allows them to be less afraid of being attacked based on any biases. They are interested in the work of showing humanity. There will always be people who are invested in a particular way of thinking, who get defensive and don't see or hear what's actually going on. You've done so many interviews – are there questions that are your favorite type of questions to answer, or questions that are your least favorite type of questions to answer?*

My least favorite questions are about policy. I don't have good answers for those questions, and I tend to give responses that frustrate people. If I had a good policy, one that was realistic, I would offer it. No "one size fits all" policy is going to fix things like climate change or political corruption. People tend to get frustrated by that response, and then I get frustrated because I wish I had a better response. Because people want answers. When I published my first book, there was a negative review that stuck with me. It said, "You don't give us any policy recommendations." Any policy recommendation I would have had would have felt dated within two years anyway—it all feels short-sighted. What is the problem? Is the problem capitalism? Is it climate change? It's a million of those things. As anthropologists, we're expected to tack on recommendations at the end of our books. I've kind of refused to do that, and that makes some people unhappy, including the press.

One of the questions I like is, "What are your influences?" Because I think about all this as music. I got asked that once. We were doing an exhibition as part of an art festival where they were interviewing all the artists, and I get thrown into that category occasionally, where they were asking me questions that you would typically ask an artist, and not an anthropologist, and they asked who my influences were. I thought, "That's interesting," because it's not really anthropology, or other anthropologists whose work I find interesting. My influences are basically punk rock and the band Fishbone. Punk rock is a big influence, because it's this whole "do it yourself" kind of thing. I wanted to be an anthropologist, and I wanted to do it my way. I come from a punk rock background. In the '90s, they made a print magazine called *Book Your Own Fucking Life*. It was a manual that told you things like, "Some dude in Japan has a garage you can play in if you can get there." You could call them up or send them a postcard with your demo. My band decided to go on tour; we had a sack of quarters and this book. We'd just make a phone call and say, "Hey, we're in Biloxi, Mississippi, right now. We're going to be in Mobile, Alabama, tomorrow. Can we play in your coffee shop?" They'd say, "Sure, come on in." If we needed things like band T-Shirts, we made them in our backyard. I've always believed in that kind of approach to things. With exhibitions, you don't need to be a fancy artist, you don't need a fancy art space to work in, you can just do these things. I think that has always been my approach to everything—if you want to make it happen, let's just do it. You don't need permission, you don't need approval

from the powers that be. Make a record; make a screen-print; do whatever you want.

Anthropology is like that, too. We were doing work in Arizona, and I had these forensic questions. Why can't we just do it? So I took a deep-dive into forensic science. I wanted to know how they did it. I knew how to run an experiment; I knew how to record field data; I went out and did it. And that was really just me wearing the punk rock hat. I tell students that if you want to do an exhibition, do it. If you want to make a podcast, do it. They have the technology; they just need the time and the energy. I bring that approach into all of my work. That's where the band Fishbone comes in. When I was a kid, I was getting into music, into punk rock, and I was introduced to this band. It's a Black, rock, funk, reggae, metal band. They put everything into one pot and mix it all up however they see fit, and then they add in politics. For me, it was like, here's this band doing crazy, genre-bending stuff. They're not asking permission, and they're being really outspoken about the issues that are important to me. I loved that melting pot— taking influences from everywhere and putting them into this new thing and trying to make something new out of it. For me, anthropology is like music. It's art, it's literature, it's science, it's all these things, putting them together, trying to come up with something new. But also something that speaks to things I'm really excited about. I think that's why the idea of interdisciplinary research speaks to me—it feels like a Fishbone thing. What happens when you combine art, film, music, and forensic science? It's like the band gave me a blueprint for putting it all together, mixing it up, and not apologizing for it.

(MS) *How would you describe your relationship to academic writing given other creative inputs that you have in the work that you do? Anthropology is expected to be public-facing and to talk to the rest of the community about society, what's going on, and the problems we are faced with. How do you meld that academic role with the academic mission?*

I think we overthink it. We worry that we won't sound smart enough, or that we have to sound a certain way. I really tried to fit into that box at one point. I gave a job talk at a private institution once. They basically said, "We need you to come in and read a formal fifteen-minute paper." I said, "That's not what I'm going to do. That's not my approach to things." They said, "You really need to do it if you want this job." I said, "If I do this, I'm going to come in and give you something that's not real. Maybe you'll hire me, but you're going to be really disappointed that I'm not really this person." There was a lot of pressure to be a certain kind of way, and I just didn't have it in me. I said, "This work is hard enough without me selling myself out to do it." I just want to do things on my own terms in a way I can feel good about myself and happy about the direction my work is going in. It wasn't until I was forced to write a book that I really started to experiment. I brought in little elements of articles that I'd written—prior to my first book—it was like half my old way of writing, and half little vignettes, and then right back into that old formula. With *The Land of Open Graves*, I felt like I was never going to finish that book if I had to follow that old formula.

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So, I thought, "Let's just write it sort of how it feels true." I didn't want to suck the life out of the stories that I'd been told, and I felt like it might be the only book I'd ever write, and so I wanted to make sure that I was true to myself. That's what I did. I just went in there, even though I had no idea what I was doing.

I read novels that inspired me. I listened to a lot of Bruce Springsteen and Jason Isbell—those guys could tell amazing stories, rich in meaning and depth, though sometimes sparse or implied, without hitting you over the head with stuff. I really pulled from those songs when I wanted to be more lyrical if I could. Anthropology is all storytelling. We're just oftentimes not trained to tell a story that flows well. We're trying to tell a story that is for a particular audience. We would all benefit from narrative nonfiction training or just even thinking about a storyline—What's your plot? Who are your characters? What's the story arc? You can express all these interesting theoretical things you want to, but still lose your reader if you aren't kind to them. Be kind to your reader; no one ever said that to me as a graduate student. Once I started thinking about it in those terms, like a reader, I thought about things like, "Would I want to stick with this story?"

Once I was having lunch with my editor at University of California Press before the book came out. She said to me, "Do you think this book is academic enough for you to get tenure?" I said, "Why are you asking me this now? It's already done, and that's a rough question." But I also said, "I don't really care anymore. I'm so tired, and even if I don't get tenure, I won't ever regret kind of finding myself in this thing." That first book was partly about finding out who I was as a person and who I wanted to be as an anthropologist. I benefitted from the fact that it wasn't based on a dissertation; I didn't have a blueprint for it. In some ways, I think it gave me a lot more freedom because I know how hard it is to go back and revisit something you've already written. I tell my students that if they're working on a book manuscript, they should throw their dissertations away and then take from there what they can bring into this new thing, and include all the things they've learned since finishing it. That way, at least they won't have a committee breathing down their necks—it's just about them. I have a former student who wrote a great dissertation on environmental degradation and toxicity. It was meant to be an anthropology book, but it morphed into a horror story. The villain of the story is the toxins in the air and in the soil. He's writing about it from a new perspective, which has been invigorating for him—to move from the dissertation stage to now wanting to sit down and write.

For me, as someone who always hated writing, I got to the point where I said, "There's nothing I want to do more than sit down and write." I never thought that would be a possibility. It wasn't until I had to rethink my whole approach that that happened. I wish I discovered that a lot sooner, but I love it now.

(AM) *In my own writing, I know the struggle of navigating an emotionally intense topic. Do you have a writing routine, or a particular approach you take as you're writing, especially when writing on heavy topics?*

My routine, when I'm *really* writing, is to get up and go running; I run and I listen to music. My new book has a soundtrack associated with each chapter. Some of those songs were songs that were playing in the background when those things were happening. Other things included music that I needed to be in that space when I was writing those things. My normal day would be to get up, go for a run, and listen to music. Then, I would sit down and write for eight hours a day. Now, because I have kids, and because my brain doesn't work like that anymore, I probably write from 8 a.m. to noon, and then I'm done and I'll read. While working on both book proj-

ects, I read a lot. I read all of Steinbeck again; I read all of Hemingway; I read all of Cormac McCarthy; I read all of Jasmine Ward. I wanted to be with books that inspired me, and they all inspired me for different reasons. Some of them—like Steinbeck or Hemingway—showed me how to put six words together and say something super heavy. Jasmine Ward works in a kind of terse writing, but she can break your heart in a way that I find to be so powerful. I'd re-immerse myself in those things and say to myself, "You can do this; these are your friends, and they are here to support you and give you some inspiration."

Regarding the "heavy" topics of my writing, I do think that writing is therapeutic. As I am writing and difficult things come up, I feel a lot better once I've said them. In my new book, the moment my friend Roberto dies was difficult for me to write; it was killing me. And when we did the recordings for the audiobook in the studio, the sections where he was dying were just so painful to relive again and to say out loud. But then, when the book ends, and he comes back to life for one funny moment, I love that so much. For me, it's like he gets to live on forever now. Despite all of the heaviness, I got to bring him back for a moment and have him be present in a way that I hope he would appreciate, in a way that makes me laugh. The writing really helped me to work through a lot of that stuff. I didn't have any good guidance for these things, at least not from anthropology. I could have used a graduate course, or even someone to talk to, who would have said, "If you want to be a better writer, you should read more good writing." No one ever said that to me. You can't be a musician if you don't immerse yourself in music, right? It was the same with writing; it was kind of an awakening for me.

(MS) *Regarding academic writing, how did you think of the audience when you wrote* The Land of Open Graves*? Academic writing can be a bit fear-based. As you said earlier, we worry about sounding smart enough, or hitting the right notes, or achieving tenure—all those pressures. I'd imagine that part of the process of freeing yourself from those constraints is about thinking of who you're writing for.*

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I'll never forget. I gave a full draft of this book to a buddy of mine at Michigan, who already had tenure. He said, "I don't have time to read this whole thing, but I read the first two pages, and I don't think you can write this. I think it's too much. I don't think you should go in that direction." And I thought to myself, all right, I'm going in the right direction. This is good. (Laughter) Regarding the audience, I wanted to please a little bit of everybody. I wanted to give everybody something to latch

on to. But also, I wanted someone like my mom, who's not an anthropologist, to be able to read it and get something from it, and feel like she could learn about anthropology without dumbing it down or without taking out the richness I think anthropology can have.

I look at *The Land of Open Graves,* and there are different moments I revisit and think, "Maybe I could have done this a little bit differently." There was a lot of experimenting in the book. For example, Chapter Two is a kind of semi-fictionalized ethnography that is basically the historical background section. When I started that chapter, I sat down and started to say, "In the desert, temperatures average between 100 and 120, and you have *this* many snakes. . . ." I said to myself, "Nobody wants to read this, and I don't want to write this. How can I tell people about this without making it sound like a laundry list?" I decided to just tell a story, a story based on realities that I've put together, and see if that gets us to the same spot. It was straight-up experimentation.

(MS) *That was one of the most powerful chapters of the book.*

It was probably the most fun chapter to write—that was where I felt like I was really writing. I tried to bring that same feeling to the new book as well and expand it all the way through. There are parts where I look back and say, "I could have done this. . . ," but you can do that with anything. I think anthropology is inherently fascinating. We're the most interesting people in the room. We have all these interesting ideas that we are thinking about, and yet, the discipline doesn't really encourage us to be the most interesting people in the room, right? Academia in general is pulling us back, asking us to be something else. I think it's a real disservice, both to us as individuals of the discipline and, more generally, to the public. We constantly have to justify our existence to the world. We're the people who study people. We should be the most important people in the room. Our discipline, for a variety of reasons, doesn't see it that way.

(MS) *You're held up as an avatar for what we ought to be as anthropologists. It's hard to do, because institutional constraints are running in the opposite direction. I think that calls back to the creativity that you mentioned, saying, "Here are some tools, I'm going to use them."*

Taking risks is scary. I mean, people were worried I wouldn't get tenure at Michigan. There were people who were actively ready to deny me tenure. It got to the point where I was just like, well, I'll go someplace else,

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because I want to keep doing what I'm doing. And if it doesn't work out, I'll become a recording engineer or do something else; I'll follow my passion. I feel very lucky that things worked out. I have a lot more flexibility now; I can kind of do whatever I want. I feel really grateful because it has freed me up to do more experimenting. It shouldn't be that way; there should be a lot more support for people doing different kinds of things. We should be nurturing difference within the discipline.

(MS) *The recognition you've received for this work has certainly magnified your impact, in the same way that anthropologists say, "We want the discipline to be impactful." How has it changed the way you do things?*

Everything I do is public-facing first. I try to think about how to engage with the public while maintaining as much of the anthropology as I can. Even with ***The Land of Open Graves,*** I wasn't thinking, "Here's my academic stuff, and then here's my public-facing stuff." I ended up realizing that I don't have the energy to do both; it's twice as much work. I decided to try to do both of them together and see if it stuck. The first question is, "Will people be able to engage with this?" Then I'd figure out how to keep it interesting, and anthropological, and true to the discipline, while simultaneously being seen and experienced more broadly. We don't encourage that enough. One of the things I greatly benefited from at Michigan was a time when a curator contacted me and wanted to do an exhibition with me. I was really apprehensive; I wanted nothing to do with exhibition work. She asked, "Why not?," and I said, I think the ethnographic museum is really problematic. She said, "Well, this will be in an art space." I said, "Well that's even worse, because now there's no context." She was very convincing and helped me to realize that being in an art space frees you up to do a bunch of other stuff and gives you a creative flexibility to explore different things. Once I realized that, I thought, "Man, I want to do this all the time." I want to do anthropology that is experimental, not in the sense of making a fourteen-hour film on a boat, but in the sense that you can draw on different things with the same kind of goal of educating the public and making anthropology accessible.

(AM) *I love what you said about art and narrative. It speaks to me personally because I made up my own major as an undergrad called "narrative and ethnographic technique" because I was specifically questioning and curious about these things. I still don't have a lot of answers, and I still write really bad academic articles.*

This is a hard thing to unlearn; it's beaten into us.

(AM) *I think one of the things that becomes apparent when you break it down is the bias that's inherent in an academic perspective – having to force a human story into a particular formula with a particular theory and then use a particular concept to understand that theory; it really sucks the air out of a thing. I'm encouraged by the way you talk about different methods of writing because it is also a method – also a theory in practice – writing and showing people as people in this particular way. One of our*

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students asked how do we do this if we're not anthropologists? How do we apply this to other disciplines? Despite the critique about scientific perspectivism being precisely that – a perspective – it has been around for a very long time, there's something about the institution that really prevents that shift from opening up; that prevents people from feeling safe about that.

I have two siblings. One of them spent most of his life incarcerated, the other has died in part because of her experiences while incarcerated. When I went to UCLA for anthropology, I wanted to explore their experiences. I said, "This is what I'm doing." And the first reaction was, "Don't do that; it's too personal, it's too close to home. You're not going to be able to get the right *perspective." I'd read Zora Neale Hurston. I'd read Ruth Behar. I'd read all these people who had shown that there's power in the personal. There's a way to upend the pretense of objectivity that keeps us in one particular lane. And it's not actually objective when it comes to the social world, the realm of life. So, I'm interested to hear more of your thoughts on this, because I think I have a deep, lifelong vendetta about this.*

Rightfully so. The Academy people think they know what's best for folks. In writing about some of these things, you're going to get advice from people who have no understanding of these things. There is a lot that comes from being close to a subject; it gives you a different kind of perspective. People are afraid of this in the Academy for various reasons, or they kind of push back because that's not been their experience with it, right? And then there's this worry that, if this person does this, maybe that's a more real ethnographic engagement than whatever I'm proposing as actual anthropology.

I just read Angela Garcia; she has a new book coming out. If you read *Pastoral Clinic* versus her new book, you can see that *Pastoral Clinic* is about addiction; it's about her family, but the book still has some things that are required to get tenure. You can see the framework is there, that it's been kind of imposed, and the new book is not that. You see that with a lot of people who start writing about their own communities, about their own families. There are these guide rails. It's like there are these barriers; you have to stay there until you get over this hurdle and then you can do whatever it is that you want to do. I don't think that's healthy for the discipline; I think it sets a bad precedent. I think there should be more openness about what ethnography is and what ethnographic writing is. We talk about stylistic writing, but ethnographic writing has its own style. Academic writing has its own style, right? We learn to write in that style, without questioning what that style is, or what it does to the discipline, or how the people we write about, think about these things. There's this assumption that writers say, "Give me all this information, and then I'll put it into the format for the other person or some other audience." When you enter graduate school and you want to be an

The question should be, "What kind of writing do you want to do?" And then, maybe, more importantly, "What is ethnographic writing?" We should be questioning that in a healthy way. I'm not someone who wants to burn the discipline down every ten years for some reason or another, but I think that we need to have more serious questions within our conversations about what it means to write ethnographically, and why we do what we do.

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Are you familiar with the sociologist Randol Contreras? He wrote a book called *Stickup Kids*, which is about drug dealers who turn to robbing drug dealers—they're all people he grew up with. He has a pretty interesting take on what happened when he went to graduate school and then came back and tried to write about his relatives and his community. He does a good job of talking about the experience. He says, "People said I was going to be too close to this, but I went to grad school and came back and it was so different. I was close to it, but not as close as people were imagining I was. I'd been changed by the training, and I don't think in a bad way, but in a way that I think makes the work really, really fascinating."

(MS) *How do you impart that to students? It can be difficult to get students to see their own experiences as valid or worthy of ethnographic attention. How do you get them to think about research projects that are close to home or familiar?*

I tell students that when I was a graduate student, I was told that in order to be an academic, I needed to overcome being a working class, first generation, bilingual person of color, Latino—all those things were working against me—and that I had to transform into something else in order to progress. When I started doing work with migration, I realized that all these things people considered to be an impediment suddenly gave me a different kind of access, a different kind of perspective that in a lot of ways opened up so many doors for me. So, now I tell students that personal experiences are a huge resource. They put you in a place to be able to ask better questions and to be able to adapt to different sensitivities. I tell them to embrace looking inward and asking themselves, "Who am I as an individual? What's my place in the world?" And then, "What kinds of questions can I ask in these situations that I'm familiar with?" I have seen students doing amazing work lately when these things that they're kind of ashamed of now become empowering in these new situations.

Part of that, too, is that a lot of these kinds of questions can be a source of embarrassment, such that you don't want to take ownership of some of these topics publicly. For me, it's taken a while to get to a point to admit, "Why am I hanging out with a bunch of maniac smugglers?" and it's like, "Well, because I used to be a maniac myself." I had this weird kinship with super self-destructive young people because I was a super self-destructive young person. When I gave my mom a copy of *Soldiers and Kings*, she told me she didn't want to know a lot of those things. But I was like, "You know, that's the *reality*. I don't want to be ashamed of those things. I think it's helpful to be able to talk about this stuff." There's a scene in the new book where this kid who I work with was super high on drugs. He was running back and forth on top of this train, and he was doing all this crazy shit. I was kind of worried about him, but I also was kind of laughing about it, because he was trying to entertain me. And then, I go on to list all these things that I used to do that were equally stupid. And then I have this line that

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says, "I never drunkenly ran across the top of a moving freight train, probably because I never had access to a moving freight train." (Laughter) I think my mom was just, like, "Oh, Jesus Christ." It's important to let students know that those experiences shape us. In the end, I think writing about them forced me to reflect. Back then, I didn't question why I was hanging out with these folks. That didn't come out until the writing process.

(AM) *I'm glad that's in the book.*

I knew there'd be a question of "How could you hang out with these guys? What do you see in them?" Rather than answering that question a million times, I put it in the book. You want to know why I'm here? It's because of this. Those things are important to know who I am as a narrator, what's my skin in the game.

I had a pretty interesting talk recently with Laurence Ralph at the triple A's (American Anthropological Association) annual conference. He has a new book coming out about his murdered stepson, and we were talking about this idea of letting people know up front what your investment is. That's a personal kind of thing, and it can open you up to critique or make you vulnerable in some ways. But it can also be liberating.

Working with people is hard. It's really difficult and messy. They're vulnerable and you're vulnerable. For me, part of ethnography is asking a lot from folks; asking them to share with me. I try to give back as much to them as they are giving to me, so they know why I'm here. It creates a different kind of bond where the conversations end up having a lot more meaning because they know what my investments are. Everybody tries to create rapport, but oftentimes don't want to say that out loud. It's not in the Russ Bernard ***Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology***, but I think we all do it in different ways, right? We're trying to find ways to relate to people, and so we share parts of ourselves, but we never let the reader or students know that. Bronisław Malinowski's diaries are probably more interesting and insightful about what ethnography could look like than the actual descriptions themselves are.

(AM) *On the other side of this process is the reception in academia. In academia, in particular, one thing that has been a struggle for me, in terms of staying in it, has been not just the fetishizing of academic writing, but the fetishizing of certain topics and certain research. For example, human smuggling as a topic of research is "so hot right now" in a way that is disgusting. Given the accolades of your writing and the topics you are writing about, how do you navigate that? What are your thoughts on that process?*

I never intended to pursue topics like human smuggling. One kid dies, and that event puts me on this path. And when it came down to thinking about the book, the press liked it because human smuggling is a hot-button, seemingly salacious topic. There's a push behind it. My response is, yes, maybe I get you in the door because you think it's going to be about this one thing. But now that I have you, I'm going to break your heart in another way and have you just leave feeling not well about the whole thing. I gave a talk on smuggling once, and someone came up to me afterward and said, "I didn't like that talk that you just gave, because it made me feel weird. It made me feel sympathy for these smugglers, and I don't think people should feel sympathy for them. Are you trying to humanize smugglers?" I said, "I'm not trying to humanize anybody. What I'm trying to do is start from this premise that they are, in fact, all human." We complicate all of these ideas and just leave you feeling weird about the whole thing in some ways, and hopefully I can get people thinking about these topics in a different way. Here are all these backstories of the abusive childhoods these smugglers come from; here are all these complicated things going on their lives; nothing is black and white in this whole thing.

One of the reasons I also gravitated towards the topic was because I knew writing about smugglers would be challenging for me—intellectually and ethically. It's easy to write a sympathetic book about migrants because they're kind of the good guy in this whole story. It's a lot harder to write a story that can bring moments of sympathy or empathy to a topic that is supposed to be cut and dry. I did it, partly, because I wanted to force myself to try to do something different in the hope that it would create new ways of thinking about this stuff. People are interested in these difficult topics for different reasons. One, because it's a voyeuristic kind of thing. But the other part of it involves the global crises of addiction, smuggling, migration, and violence. I think it's our job as anthropologists, not journalists, to tell that story in a different kind of way.

Part of me gravitates towards this stuff because the difficult subject matter speaks to me in a variety of ways. But also because I feel like I'm better equipped than a journalist or someone else to tell a story about things you haven't heard yet; I like that challenge. That's when I get really excited about the potential of anthropology. People ask, "How is anthropology different from journalism?" We spend a lot more time there, and we also spend a lot more time worrying about what we're doing and why we're doing it. Not all of us. There are some people who write about these things, and they can be super problematic, and maybe they end up doing more harm than good. That is concerning.

I don't know what I'm going to do next, maybe write about guitar pedals, or something lighter for a bit. Everyone jokes that, if I were to do that, I'm sure I would find some dark, horrible thing about guitar pedals, and then just ruin that for myself and for other people. I'd dwell on who's making them in

That's what I appreciate about the discipline—we're dealing with these difficult topics. We're not just doing the work and writing about it, we're also trying to have these conversations. A journalist would say, "This is an important story. Why wouldn't I write about it?" In anthropology we say, "It's an important story, but how are we going to write about this and not make things worse?"

China or something. But, that's what I appreciate about the discipline—we're dealing with these difficult topics. We're not just doing the work and writing about it; we're also trying to have these conversations. A journalist would say, "This is an important story. Why wouldn't I write about it?" In anthropology we say, "It's an important story, but how are we going to write about this and not make things worse?"

(MS) *How do you instill hope in your students and in yourself? What is your general outlook on teaching and your practice as a scholar?*

One thing that gives me hope is seeing a student get really excited about anthropology and about their world, but also what they can do in this world. There's something really empowering about someone saying, "Hey, your experiences are really important. You can do these things. And you can probably do them really well, or better than folks coming in from the outside. Embrace that, own that." It's back to that whole DIY thing—go and do it. Getting to see students do that and get excited about research in general, that gives me so much hope. I was a student who didn't know what I was going to go out and do. It wasn't until someone helped me along and said, "You can do this, and this is how you do it. You've got the gumption; you've just got to keep going to persist."

I don't know what else I would do, other than migration. I don't think I would be able to, in good conscience, walk away from these questions. As hopeless as it can feel in different moments, we need anthropologists to bring attention to these topics, to ask questions, and more importantly, to get our students and the world to ask these questions. I've had colleagues in different institutions who have a complete disdain for teaching. I think it's because they're doing it wrong. When you do it right, you walk out of that classroom thinking, "That was fucking great!" I joke that the older I get I keep thinking I'm in my 20s. I keep thinking I'm a college student because I'm just around them so much. I'm like a vampire who's taking all their energy and putting it into myself.

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Sometimes, you walk out of a lecture thinking, "Oh, man, that sucked, that was not good." For me, that's the most demoralizing thing when I give a lecture—I wasn't there, I wasn't present. I tell my students that my approach to the classroom is like music. I come into this place, and I think, "I could be dead tomorrow and this is the last thing that I'll ever do." I don't want people to say, "He came in here and totally dialed it in. You could tell he didn't want to be here." So, when I come to the classroom, I dance around; I do whatever I can to get students to pay attention and to get excited. I want them to know that I really want to be there. I went on sabbatical for almost two years while working on a book. During that time, I had really gotten away from teaching. When I finally started back to teaching, I realized that I just needed it so much.

(MS) *I was going to say one last thing. I really loved the chapter featuring the two men you were friends with [Manuel and Lucho] and the whole thing about humor — I just loved that.*

Oh, yeah. When I started writing that stuff, people said to me, "I didn't think I'd

laugh out loud while reading a book with a title like *The Land of Open Graves* and with this type of subject matter." For me, with ethnography, and even in that world, there is so much humor all the time.

(MS) *The way they narrativize their experience, the sarcasm, the irony, the self-deprecation. . .*

People will start telling you about the worst thing that ever happened to them, and then suddenly they're laughing in the middle of the story. With migration, people will either edit that out because they think it's inappropriate or it's going to undermine the story, or the rapport is not there enough for people to trust them enough to be open.

(AM & MS) *Thank you for your time.*

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