

## INTERVIEW WITH JASON DE LEÓN

**Marijana Hameršak**

Jason De León is a professor of Anthropology and Chicana, Chicano, and Central American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles with his lab located at the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology. Prior to joining the faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles he taught in the anthropology department at the University of Michigan between 2010 and 2019.

De León received his Ph.D. in anthropology from Penn State in 2008 with his dissertation on the early political economy of the ancient Olmec of Mesoamerica. In 2009 he initiated today's prominent Undocumented Migration Project, a long-term collaborative art and student-inclusive anthropological study of clandestine migration between Latin America and the United States. The project uses a combination of ethnographic, visual, archaeological, and forensic approaches to document and understand various aspects of unauthorized border crossings and the evolving material culture associated with them, as well to assist families of missing migrants search for their loved ones. De León is currently the Executive Director of the project and its Principle Investigator.

De León is the author of many academic articles and the influential and thoughtfully written book *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, which features photos by Michael Wells. In 2016 the book was awarded by the Margaret Mead Award by the American Anthropological Association and the Society for Applied Anthropology. Recently he has been publishing on smuggling, the moral economy of undocumented migration, the heritage dimension of the material culture of crossings, the history and ethnography of counter-infrastructures developed by marginal communities in the Mexico-USA borderlands, the physiological costs of undocumented migration in the same borderlands, and other topics. He is currently working on the manuscript of the book *Soldiers and Kings: A Photoethnographic Exploration of Human Smuggling Across Mexico* and with Michael Wells he is preparing a photo-monograph *Hostile Terrain: Photos from the Undocumented Migration Project 2009–2020*.

De León has been co-curating many exhibitions related to undocumented migration, including the award-winning exhibition *State of Exception* (with Amanda Krugliak and Richard Barnes, 2013–2017). He is the head curator of the pop-up exhibition or installation *Hostile Terrain 94* (UMP project, since 2018) presented all over the world with the idea to raise awareness about the deaths that have been

occurring almost daily at the Mexico-US border since 1994 as a result of the US strategy of border control.

De León is also an active musician who played with the hardcore-punk-reggae band Youth in Asia in the 1990s and with the Americana band The Wilcox Hotel in the mid-2000s. He is currently involved in various musical projects including periodic reunions with The Wilcox Hotel.

Marijana Hameršak interviewed Jason De León for *Etnološka tribina* in October 2022.<sup>1</sup>

*For your Ph.D., you were working as an archeologist in Mexico. As soon as you finished your thesis, you left the work on the stone tools of ancient Olmec and made the first in a series of, in your words, “questionable career choices” and “reinvented” yourself as an ethnographer. What happened?*

Part of it was I had been doing archaeological work for about a decade and I was just kind of growing disillusioned with the direction that my archaeological work was taking. I felt like the training that I had received was very traditional, in the sense that there was rarely ever a discussion of the relationship between politics and research, or politics in archaeology. And so, part of it was I think I really just was looking for something perhaps more socially relevant. Also, I’ve worked in Mexico for so long and was getting to know lots of women and men who were working-class folks who were digging ditches with archaeologists who migrated and who had these sorts of very dramatic migration experiences that I just became increasingly more interested in and really wanted to try to raise awareness about it. I think it was a variety of things that shifted my research interests.

*So, this is how you started your more than decade-long anthropological research of undocumented migration in the Mexico-US borderlands and the Undocumented Migration Project. In your book, *The Land of Open Graves*, you focus on the US strategy of “Prevention Through Deterrence” and its use of the Sonoran Desert. Can you tell us more about that?*

One of the things that people don’t really understand about border security globally is that governments have gotten increasingly more adept at trying to use the natural environment as a way to slow people down, whether this is the Mediterranean or the Aegean, the Sahara, the Darién Gap of Southern Central America, or the Sonoran Desert of Arizona. All of these difficult-to-cross environments have increasingly been exploited by government agencies. The United States government in the mid-1990s, began the program “Prevention Through Deterrence,” where it really was this recognition that if they made it difficult for people, or impossible for people, to cross in urban ports of entry, like San Diego or El Paso, then they could funnel people towards a place like the Sonoran Desert of Arizona. There, you didn’t need to have a border fence or you didn’t need to have hundreds

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was done within the framework of the research project ERIM (*The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU: from Ethnography to Keywords*, HRZZ IP 2019-04-6642).

of agents on the ground because even if someone was able to illegally enter the United States then they still had to walk dozens of miles across this very difficult landscape. The idea was that this physical encounter with nature would itself act to weaponize nature against migrants because it's cheaper and also easier than outsourcing the brutality that migrants experience. If someone dies in the desert or drowns in the Mediterranean governments can say, "Well, we didn't do that. Nature did it." Even though the stage has been set for nature to play this role in border enforcement. For my early work in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, I was just really trying to understand how the desert fit into this security infrastructure. By the time I started doing it, I became much more aware of how that was starting to operate around the globe. And I think now that is a common kind of approach that is used globally.

*Building on Mbembe's necropolitics, in The Land of Open Graves you write about necroviolence. What is necroviolence? How does it affect the afterlife or postmortem itineraries of the deceased, their families, as well as our knowledge about border deaths?*

The necroviolence idea really was a very simple one and it did grow out of me trying to understand Mbembe's necropolitics and thinking about the ways in which governments are able to decide what life is valuable, who lives, and who dies. For me, something like necroviolence is much older and predates the nation-state in a lot of ways. It really just refers to violence that humans perpetuate through the specific treatment of the dead. Thinking about necroviolence in the Arizona context, there was the fact that you had thousands of people who were dying in the Sonoran Desert and it wasn't just the fact that they were losing their lives, but also the fact that they were disappearing, that they were being ravaged by animals. It's not just this moment of death that is so brutal, but it's how the living think about or experience that death after the fact. I think that humans for the longest time have recognized that like if we do things to the bodies of our enemies that is, in fact, a way to generate new forms of violence. So, for me in that context, it was really just trying to give people a language to be able to talk about this thing that I think so many anthropologists and archaeologists have been dealing with. We have various examples of it from throughout human history. But we felt like we really just didn't have a term to use for the mistreatment of the dead as a way to anger or upset the living. It doesn't have to be something carried out by the state. It can also be just very much on an individual level.

A lot of that work that I do now with the Colibri Center for Human Rights, which we have just legally absorbed, focuses on families of the missing: trying to both re-reunite people with missing loved ones and also trying to show the public that these disappearances are things that are long-lasting, and that families are oftentimes in this perpetual state of grieving or often cannot even begin to grieve because they're never quite sure if someone is dead or alive. But for me, I think that the way in which these migration structures have allowed for the disappearance of people with very little accountability is perhaps the most brutal part. It is

somehow even worse than just someone dying in the desert. The fact that someone can disappear in the desert, for me, just feels so much worse in a lot of ways.

*What about the bureaucratic or administrative side of necroviolence. Is it possible to, for example, collect the DNA of a family member for matching it with the deceased if a family member is living undocumented in the USA or abroad?*

We work very closely with undocumented families. We do lots of trips to people's homes to collect DNA. So, we are doing that. But we're a non-governmental, non-profit organization that's doing it. We were doing it on a very small scale. And I think in a lot of ways the fact that the federal government has no interest in this, and is not helping at all, is another form of disappearance and another way to just make this process harder and harder for folks. There are a lot of bureaucratic obstacles to doing this work. For example, if we wanted to get funding then the federal government in the United States has occasionally sort of dangled money in front of us to help to identify some of these individuals. But the problem for us is that it oftentimes comes with the requirement that we share information about these families, which of course is the last thing we would want to do. There are lots of bureaucratic things that are in place that are slowing down or really making this work incredibly impossible.

*The Undocumented Migration Project combines ethnographic work in Mexico with forensic and archaeological research in Arizona. Why this clear disciplinary or methodological division by geography and how is it related to the geopolitical realities in place, on the one hand, and to the ethical and methodological questions, on the another?*

Especially in the desert, it only gives you certain aspects of this. I mean, oftentimes, you're doing the work and migrants themselves are physically absent. It's the sort of traces of this movement or it's the human remains of an individual. Especially with the archaeological work, I always tried to make it clear that that never could take the place of actual ethnographic work with people. I have always tried to privilege the narratives of individuals who are going into this experience, which means a significant amount of work has to happen in a place like Mexico, Honduras, or elsewhere. Each of the approaches provides a kind of unique sort of perspective, but for me, the power of anthropology comes from the ability to put all the things together and then create a more nuanced kind of narrative about it. I have shifted away from the archaeological work in the last seven years. I have been doing mostly ethnographic and photographic work on smuggling in Mexico and Central America. Now, as that project is sort of finishing up, we're looking forward again, figuring out if there is now a way to combine forensic science with ethnography. I am not sure but I am always trying to find ways to bring in different methodological approaches.

*In The Land of Open Graves you discuss participant observation as not always the most appropriate methodological approach in researching of this type of migration. Why?*

With participant observation, just because you *can* do it in a certain context does

not mean that you should. I find that a lot of times, especially when it is in these sorts of extreme situations, we oftentimes learn more about the ethnographers and their experiences than we do about the actual experiences that people are having. I am always worried about participant observation. I would get asked questions like, "Have you ever crossed the border with a migrant? Have you ever ridden on the tops of a train with a migrant?" People think about migration as if that is something that would be okay to do or that that is a rational kind of question. But I have a friend who studies heroin addiction, and no one ever asks him, if he ever OD'd on heroin as a way to theoretically understand this thing. But of course, people are not doing that. With migration studies, sometimes it is just like people are doing it for this kind of adventure, or for the credibility of saying, "I did this thing." I do not think we are learning that much about that thing in that way. We could have learned a lot more from the people who have actually gone through it. We can be smarter about ways to get insight without having to do things that I think oftentimes get a lot of credit, because it's so fantastical. But I do not think, at the end of the day, that we are learning all that much more about that process itself, because, of course, if I crossed the border I am not going to go to prison. I will never know what it's like to be running for my life and worrying about dying, even though I had gone through this thing. So, I think that there are some limits to that approach.

*And why can personal narratives be problematic in this specific research context?*

With migration two things happen. First, the farther people go and get away from the experience they forget things and block things out. Second, they embellish other kinds of things. Our memory always plays kind of tricks on us the farther we get from something and a story kind of evolves. But I also think that, later on, we develop certain ideas about what makes a good story about migration and what researchers want to hear. When you ask someone right after they have gone through an experience, you tend to get a different story than the one that you get five months or five years later. Having interviewed the same people right after something has happened, and then five or ten years later, I could see how that sort of thing evolves, and you have to remind them, "Oh, what about this? Or what about that? Or that?" Or they can say "that never happened," even though I can say they told me twice before that it happened. But at the same time, we are all guilty of that, and it is really just more of a matter of whether we are interviewing people after the fact or if we are using these personal narratives. It is just a matter of, I think, using them in conjunction with other kinds of things and trying to take them with a grain of salt. There are important moments when you need to allow people the space to tell their story however they want to tell it. But if we try to add other kinds of context to it, and other nuances, that is not to say that one is better than the other. I just think that if we put them all together then we end up with perhaps a more interesting or more balanced kind of narrative.

*Besides ethnography, archeology of the contemporary plays, or at least played, an important role in your research. You are interested in the objects that border crossers left behind, objects which are usually perceived as trash and garbage and extensively used in anti-migrant discourses. Why do you find archeology and these objects important?*

Archaeology can be an incredibly powerful tool to help us understand the human condition, human experiences now in the past, and it opens our eyes to looking at different things that maybe an ethnographer would perhaps overlook. This is just what I think, in general. My own background is in archaeology, but I do not do it very much anymore. I think that because of my training, I probably have a different perspective on, for example, the human relationship with the landscape, human relationships with material culture, and notions of time and space, which are big archaeological questions. That is not to say that ethnographers do not ask those questions, too. Archaeologists have had the benefit of looking at longer periods of time and being able to see patterns that, if we are thinking about it just in the contemporary moment, we would overlook. For me, archaeology is just a new lens to bring into this conversation that I think can really help people. We are seeing it happen around the globe in relation to migration. People are doing archaeological work in Lampedusa, in Greece, and these other places. It is because, as ethnographers, we are trying to watch, we are trying to observe this social process that is hidden, that is clandestine, and that is oftentimes difficult to access, but it leaves an archaeological footprint. Archaeology in some ways allows us to see this thing that we do not always get to see with our eyes. So, I think it really adds some depth and a different perspective on these things. It does also serve other kinds of things, for example, political purposes. I think that archaeology as a tool can make the argument that these experiences that marginalized people are having around the globe really happened. You can go to Lampedusa, or to Lesbos, and you can go to boat cemeteries, and you can see these places where people have suffered. I think that in those instances archaeology provides evidence that this actually did happen. There is physical evidence that these people suffered. I think that this can be really important. I hope, in the long run, that archaeology can help us maintain a better understanding of those things, because over time our memories change and the storytelling evolves and things get whitewashed. I hope that archeology can stand as a way to remind us what those experiences actually looked like, and maybe felt like.

*I am sorry for focusing on technical details but, having the recent expansion of such projects in mind, I am curious to hear how you at Undocumented Migration Project approach the things you find at the sites. How have your practices and procedures of documentation changed over time?*

We treat those materials like we would in any archaeological context. Everything is collected, cataloged, and archived. We collect as much information as possible: GPS coordinates, and all those kinds of things. We have about 7,000 objects that are in the collection at UCLA. One of the reasons we stopped collecting was that



we just really ran out of room. In the beginning, we used to take everything from these different sites. When we stopped doing it towards the end, we would go to a site, we would map it, would make an inventory of everything that was present, and then would collect a small sample of those materials to take back. We would document everything with photography, as well. We would have a pretty detailed list of what was present. At UCLA everything is in archival boxes. Anybody can look at the collection, if they want, they just need to come to UCLA. Most of the materials these days are used for exhibitions, but we do have researchers who are coming in and doing projects on those objects.

*Why does collecting things left on the migrant clandestine trail generate strange sensations and constant questioning, such as “Why am I doing this? Is this right or wrong? Can these dilemmas ever be resolved?”*

I do not think you can ever resolve it. You just have to have a good justification for why you are doing it. For me, in the beginning, I wanted to record evidence that these things were happening. I was very concerned that these objects were getting destroyed and thrown away and I wanted to do as much as I could to at least preserve some of them. At the same time, it is always a weird thing to be collecting someone else's objects and touching these things that can be very, very personal. And then also putting them into exhibitions. That is always a tricky thing to do, as well. For me, at the end of the day, the rationale of doing the archaeology was really to conserve this moment in history. I knew so much of it was going to be lost forever. It was essentially a salvage project. But it is one that I think constantly requires this discussion about ethics, and then there is this discussion about representation and about access and who should be doing this. When I talked to students who want to do this kind of work now, my question always to them is, “Why? What is that going to look like?” I also ask, “If you are going to collect these materials, how will you then put those objects into conversation with interviews with people who are still around?” Because of course people will say things like, “I am collecting these objects, because they give a voice to the voiceless”, or this kind of thing. I would never agree with it, because I feel like those people have a voice, but you just have not heard it. It is much easier to collect their things than it is to go talk to them. I always tell students if you are going to do the archaeology, you really have to also do the ethnographic work, because the archaeology alone really just tells a very fragmented story.

*You curated and co-curated several exhibitions and installations based on the artifacts found in desert. In Croatia we recently had some of the first archeological and art gallery displays of things left or lost by migrants in nearby forests and urban jungles. What are your thoughts about exhibiting such objects?*

For me, it has been a very evolving process. In the first exhibition I worked on, *The State of Exception*, it was me a curator with an outside photographer, and we really had lots of disagreements about content. I wanted to include a lot of audio and he wanted to focus on the objects. I had zero interest in the objects or they were very

secondary to my interest. Now we never display objects unless there is a significant amount of audio, video, and other things that allow migrants themselves to be heard. Even with *The State of Exception*, in the last versions of that show, there were thousands of backpacks on a fifteen-meter-long wall, and at the end, we had embedded speakers inside of the backpacks. When you get close you could hear people telling you stories. At this big exhibition happening in Los Angeles there is a significant amount of audio and video recordings, migrants' videos shot with cellphones, and videos that we have done. We have done a whole series of photo exhibitions of images migrants have shot down with cell phones and disposable film cameras. I am always trying to find ways to privilege the voices of those individuals alongside these other things. For me, the objects that people leave behind and peoples' experiences are very important and can help people to think about these things in new ways, but I think it is also our job to find ways to empower migrants themselves to be heard in these spaces. This is challenging, but I think it is a good challenge. That one I really enjoy working on.

*Your book is written, as you state in the book, in non-standard academic English or sometimes untranslated Mexican slang and, I would add, in a non-standard style for academic publication, with lots of photographs, crisscrossed with different genres. Why?*

I think the biggest thing was that I never wanted to write a book. I did not think I would have to write a book until my university said, "You have to write a book to keep your job." I had grown up writing journal articles and even then I did not like academic writing. I have never found it to be very pleasurable at all and when I was tasked with writing a full-length book I kind of freaked out. Writing a book is like writing ten articles, and I hate writing one article, and now I have to do this much longer kind of thing. So, I made a decision that if I am going to write a book it needed to be a book that I felt good about. It needed to be a book I was going to enjoy writing. The book that I felt was perhaps truer both to the way that I speak about these things and the way that I am in the world, but more importantly I wanted to preserve the kind of life and energy of people that I had worked with and the stories they told me. I wanted to preserve that as much as possible. It just had to become a different writing style for me. It was a lot of experimentation and I had a good editor in California who helped me to figure out how to bring these pieces together, but a big part of that was the fact that I did not think I could do a book in any other way. We talked about the importance of our work. I think anthropology is one of the important things we can do. We are studying some of the most pressing social issues and yet our discipline trains us and rewards us to write in a way that is totally inaccessible. These important stories that can help people and could raise awareness are being destroyed by language. So, I wanted to find ways to engage with people outside of the academy. It evolved with writing but also with me experimenting with different types of writing and different genres and just trying to tell as complete a story as I could and, at the same time, to preserve the humor and the emotion and all the things I was feeling and what



the people I was writing about were feeling. It was a total experiment. As the book was coming out, I remember my editor said to me, "Do you think this book is academic enough to get you tenure?" And I thought, "Oh shit. Why is she asking me that? I hope so." If not, I still at least feel good about what I did.

*I see your writing as also positioned against authorities' systematic use of euphemism and the sterile language in which, instead of killing, "deterrence" is used, for example. It challenges administrative and academic jargon. This leads me to the question about your thoughts about the relationship between art and anthropology and your efforts to bring them together.*

Once a student said to me after reading introduction, "This book feels really angry. It feels like you are writing about this in a very angry way." And I said, "Well, yeah, probably." Part of it is because I wrote the introduction last. I wrote the book and by the time I got to end of the book, I was so angry and heartbroken that I had to go back and write the introduction. There was no way for me to not be sort of emotional about it. And then as I started working on the book, I just realized, too, that it would be a complete disservice to try to sterilize some of that stuff. I had some academics say to me, "Why does the writing have to be so heavy sometimes." And I said, "Well, because that is the way that the world is experienced by people." Migration is a brutal thing and the last thing that I want to do is hide that from the public. I feel like it is my job to try to preserve that as much as possible and if that means me being angry about it too, that is totally fine. I just want people to be outraged by these human rights violations that I think that we are very passively letting go on. It does not help to overly sterilize something with language, whether that is the federal government language or through anthropological writing. You can be theoretical and you can write interesting theoretical pieces without having to be heavy on the jargon and without having to be inaccessible. We tend to think that that theory is supposed to be unreadable. Theory is supposed to be the thing that it is simplified and help us to understand a complex thing, and yet, when we write about it, and it is totally the opposite. I have really tried to work against that. In terms of my own take on anthropology I think I am just trying to be happy and fulfilled with the work that I am doing and keep going. In order to do that, I have to constantly find new ways to engage with the subject, because I think it can get really hard not get burned out. For me writing is helpful. Exhibition work is helpful, photography as well. All these things forced me to think about this thing that I live in and breathe, but I think about it in in different ways. I think that that keeps me going intellectually, and emotionally. But then also, it helps me to think about new ways to engage with the public. At the end of the day, none of the work that I am doing is for the academy. I work in the academy, so I am doing it through particular sort of venues and there are expectations with that. My expertise is sort of my professional position. If I were to suddenly come out and say, "I'm a poet who writes about undocumented migration." That is kind of getting far. I am trying to test the bounds of art. But it is in a way sort

of furthering this conversation around migration and I also hate the limitations that the disciplinary boundaries can have. When someone says, "You have to be an anthropologist like this," I want to do complete opposite. For me, exhibition work, photography, film work, all these things, creative writing, are ways for me to push back against what it means to be an anthropologist, and I think it is a more interesting world when we have anthropologists who are doing these range of things. For the longest time, I was told that all of these other things that I was interested in, especially like, my artistic sort of interests, were secondary, or were wholly separate from the anthropological work. It was not until I got into it that I realized that my being, my understanding of the world through art, literature, music, these things directly inform the type of anthropology that I want to do. When I embrace those things, I am having a much more interesting time. I am doing work that I find to be more fulfilling personally and that is potentially more accessible to different audiences.

*You often work with others, students, interlocutors, colleagues, and friends, and strive to establish, as it seems, deep, sensitive relationships with them. You and Michael Wells, the author of many photographs in your book, have traveled together since the early 1990s, including your trip to the Bad Religion concert. How do you manage to make these professional and personal relationships last in the longrun? How are they nurtured and sustained in your example? Why do collaborations matter to you?*

With Mike it really works out because I think we are on the same page about so many things personally and professionally. He is someone who I have extended conversations with about issues of representation and about ethics and methods. It is really helpful to work with someone when you are both equally worried about what it is that you are doing, and I think that helps keep us kind of fresh. But also, there are just so many things that I want to do in the world that I do not know how to do. So, I find that these collaborations really expand my work in really powerful ways. I am constantly trying to learn new things. Collaboration is not just trying to put something new into the world, but me trying to find them as being a moment of kind of personal growth or a moment of getting excited about some new thing, and then thinking about all the possibilities that can come from that. But I have had collaborations with others that maybe did not work out like that, and part of it is that you cannot do it. The people that I have collaborated with the longest are the people that I get along with. We are very close on a kind of personal level and that makes the work so much easier, because it can be really hard to have a professional relationship around a subject matter that is so emotionally challenging. If everyone is not on the same page emotionally about this thing, then it can be hard to do the scientific work or whatever you want to call it after the fact. I have got some collaborators that I do some of that stuff with, but we are on different kind of levels of engagement with the subject matter and that keeps those collaborations at a certain level and does not have them become more sustained or in depth.

*You often put in the center individual persons, with names, families, friends. You speak about Maricela, Memo, Lucho, José and others, but you also highlight the paradigmatic dimension of their experience and struggle. Why?*

For me the individual stuff, it is like there are always two parts to it. It is the individual stories that are the things that I gravitate toward the most. When I do ethnographic work, I would rather interview five people very closely than fifty people. There are different benefits to the scale of interviewing hundred people. You can learn certain things and see certain patterns versus the more narrow focus you get from focusing on these individuals. But for me, personally, I enjoy the individual work much more, having these prolonged relationships. And then it is through those stories that I will then try to build a kind of a groundwork or framework of this ethnographic closeness. This is what it looks like at the individual level. Then I want to zoom out so that you can understand this happening at a much larger scale, but I always find that I am more interested in the individual stories. I am much better at telling a compelling story if I can bring you close to one or two or three individuals, but that is just like my kind of work. I have worked a lot with demographers and sociologists who are working at bigger scales and making larger sets of data. I appreciate that approach, but I just do not think that I am very good at it. I much prefer the closeness and personal relationships that you can develop. I find those to be ones that are really rewarding in a lot of ways.

*In one of your recent public talks you said that you are “suspicious of anthropology that does not engage with the public or does not strive to raise awareness” Why?*

JDL: Well, right now the world is on fire, right? We are living literally in a global climate crisis. Racism, police brutality, all of these things that anthropology studies. I think we can be making important contributions. I just feel like it is our job to, in a lot of ways, try to save our species, because we are the experts on all of human behavior. And yet, so many of us are being discouraged from engaging with the public and I just think that all anthropology really should be public. I think it is dangerous to make this distinction between public anthropology and something else, because then suddenly, that comes with the value judgment that if you are doing public facing work, it is somehow not as theoretical not as rigorous. I think that the people who are often saying that are those who maybe are not very good at doing public facing stuff, or do not want to waste their time with it. But why are we doing this in the first place? I was under the impression that as anthropologists we are trying to raise awareness about the human condition. If that is the case then we should be actively trying to find ways to engage with the public. I think the public wants to know what we are doing. We are super interesting and yet, so many of us do not either get the encouragement that they need to go do the stuff, or that there are actual impediments to people doing this kind of stuff, which I think is really unfortunate.

*Have you ever encountered the direct discrediting of, if not your work, but some others’ work as not being only anthropological, but also activist. As if being engaged or vocal must*

*be a sign of something wrong, as if your insights and data are not valid if you speak out or try to find ways to speak out. What do you think about that?*

I get that all the time, from different folks. People call me an activist, but I never describe myself as an activist. I describe myself as an anthropologist who works on difficult political topics. There is always this pushback, but I think the label of activist suddenly means that you are not doing rigorous research and that you are not somehow objective. And then my response would be, “Well, no anthropology is wholly objective anyway, right?” I am taking ownership of these things that I am trying to raise awareness about. I am trying to do good science. People can be dismissive about it and I think that, over the years, I have just gotten used to not caring about it. Now I really do not. I am working on the book I am trying to finish right now and it is a trade book. It is a public facing book that is not intended to be read by academics, and maybe it will be. It is all about migration and smuggling, but also about the work that ethnographers do and why it is important to try to get the public to understand what ethnography is. Why it is different from journalism or other research approaches.

*And my last set of questions: Are you finishing your monograph on smuggling? What about the Undocumented Migration Project plans of going more global and back in time?*

JDL: Yeah, I am looking at a big draft of it right now. I was told that it will be out in Spring of 2024. The Undocumented Migration Project is now working a lot more in Latin America. With Colibri we have expanded our work to work more with families of the missing, but one of the things that we are very interested in doing is coalition building with people who are working on similar issues around the globe. We would love to come to Europe. We are trying to. I was in Lesbos, in the summer, mostly for vacation, but just trying to make some connections. We are just very interested in learning about what others are doing. I would love to put together an exhibition on global migration and the missing, working with partners from all over the place. So, that is the hope that we can start to do more collaborative work. I am probably always going to be someone who works in Latin America, for all kinds of reasons that I am. That is probably where my work will mostly take place, but we are always looking to coalition building and coming up with new relationships.