

- Speaker 1: [00:03](#) Hi, this is Sarah Carson, I'm here on the floor at the AAA conference talking to people about why anthropology matters.
- Student 1: [00:11](#) Anthropology matters because human existence is not simple and we have deeply layered ways of expressing what it means to be human, what it means to have a certain subject position, and anthropologists are uniquely situated to disperse that kind of information to the public in a way that the public can understand.
- Student 2: [00:36](#) In my work is on integrating anthropology into secondary education in order to teach kids before they turn 18 about other cultures in order to reduce things like racism and anti immigrant feelings, anti-LGBT feelings, and hopefully build a better world in the post-Trump era.
- Student 3: [01:02](#) I think anthropology matters because it's widely applicable and could make real change.
- Student 4: [01:09](#) I think anthropology matters because you can use it in almost every aspect sense. It in essence is just the study of people and people are everywhere.
- Arjun: [01:19](#) Welcome to the eighth and final episode of season one of Anthological Airwaves. In this episode, we think with our recent AAA meeting about why our work matters. Now, over the course of our five days at the annual meeting, the idea that anthropology matters became a kind of running joke. Time matters, theory matters, we matter, but I think what also became clear in this particular articulation is that we want to matter more and in publics beyond just our scholarly community and the question which we've asked over the course of this season is how? How do we produce work that foregrounds the relevance of our field to the many ongoing political debates that we have to be a part of. In this episode, we'll hear from Laurence Ralph of Harvard University, who's worked, provides one such response. Ralph asks us to interrogate the overdetermined narratives and images associated with gang violence and provides one ethnographic example of how to create theoretical and sensorial opportunities to challenge our stereotypical cliched understandings of communities like the south side of Chicago. In his work. Ralph challenges us to reframe narratives that have been conventionally about violence as injury and dreaming. How might this attention facilitate an ongoing process of healing taking place in communities? What might happen when we take seriously the emotions of those we work with anger, aspiration, grief, and madness, for example, not as pathology,

but as justified and productive. And with that I'll pass it over to Leniqueca Welcome, doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania. Enjoy.

- Leniqueca: [03:11](#) Hi, my name is Leniqueca Welcome, and I'm a third-year student at the University of Pennsylvania. And then here with Dr. Laurence Ralph.
- Laurence: [03:17](#) Hey, how's it going?
- Leniqueca: [03:19](#) Great. So before I jump into more specific questions, can you just talk a little bit about what you're working on, and what you've worked on in the past?
- Laurence: [03:29](#) Sure. My first book was specifically on gang violence in Chicago, but more generally speaking, it's on kind of the concept of injury, it's on violence, it's on how people in under resourced communities cope with injury and violence through the work that they're doing on a community level.
- Leniqueca: [03:57](#) Working in Chicago on gang violence, you joined like a really long lineage of scholars who've tried to investigate "the ghetto". So how do you negotiate that? How do you differentiate yourself from the work that's come before?
- Laurence: [04:13](#) The funny thing about Chicago is that, people kind of differentiate you or not through the process of doing ethnographic field work and that is, since Chicago has such a long history of research and researchers in communities, the people in those communities also have a good sense of what it is that researchers do. And so they ask you, [how] are you gonna write it? Oh, you're going to write a book like this and you're going to write a book like that and they kind of position you in a way and hold you accountable in a way. And so that was one of the most surprising things that I've found going into Chicago and living in the community that I lived in was that, you know, people had a really profound sense that their community had been written about before. It had been written about in ways that they didn't like, that it will continue to be written about, but they want to know kind of what ways are you going to tell these stories? What ways are you going to include my voice or not? What ways are you going to characterize my community? And they really had a lot of stakes in that and those questions.
- Leniqueca: [05:38](#) And I think what makes your work really interesting is that then you utilize this concept of injury in this space, right? Which is

something that we don't really see coming up in these other ethnographies in spaces that are similar and especially not when we're talking about poor black communities, right, so I'm really interested in this concept of injury and just can you talk a little bit more about that, why you chose injury and what do you think it's doing for you politically in this work?

Leniqueca: [06:09](#)

Yeah, sure. That's a great question. So I started, um, working in anti-violence in Chicago before I knew that I was going to actually do an ethnographic project there. And in terms of delay that I'm anti violence is frame the way that the gang problem is framed. It's often framed in terms of the question of violence and the question of gun violence in particular. And so I'm dealing with those questions. There was something that never sat well with me in terms of the way that kind of victim mode was described and the way that the perpetrators of violence were described. Both seem to be overdetermined. What? Another thing that surprised me in my research was the kind of prevalence of disability in, in, in terms of just the striking fact that, you know, you see young people in wheelchairs who have been paralyzed as a result of gun violence.

Laurence: [07:23](#)

And so I wanted to develop a project that kind of saw the world, saw the community saw the gang through the eyes of someone who had been injured, someone who had been, who had acquired disability. And so that became my first Jessica position between violence and injury. Just the physicality of it. But then when I got into the kind of social conditions that create gun violence, create the context for violence, I thought that just to talk about physical injury wasn't sufficient. And so I developed out of that concept of social injury, which kind of includes a lot of the history that created the context for violence. But even things like, how representationally this community was being described and it goes back to your first question in terms of the work that had become before and the popular discourse in the contemporary media about under-resourced community, about the question of poverty and that created a certain kind of injury as well.

Laurence: [08:36](#)

And so I wanted to trace out these social conditions that create the context for physical injury. And so part of my book dealt with those social injuries and part of the book dealt with the physical injuries, like a disability disease. And when I ended up writing the book, I made the decision to kind of reverse the order in terms of making the social injury come first as the first part of the book and then the physical injuries that manifest from those sorts of conditions as the second part of the book. And that's sorta how I conceived of the project ultimately. But

the final thing I'll say about injuries that for me, injury connotes a notion that healing is possible. And so part of what I observed ethnographically was that people might have been subject to violence, but they didn't dwell on their condition and they didn't dwell in the reality of the violence. They didn't sit there, they were constantly doing things, creating programs, thinking about ways that they could manage their injury and thinking about ways that they can conceive of a future life in relation to those injuries. And so the violence didn't seem adequate, but I needed a concept that could account for the ways that people were trying to heal from violence and that that drew me to the concept of injury as well.

Leniqueca: [10:16](#)

And, I just want to pick up on something you said when you were ending, where you said how people think about future life, right? Because I think the other thing that your book gave us was dreaming and renegade dreams. So I want you to speak a little bit more about that because that's really a kind of different way of thinking about how to like defy and resists present conditions.

Laurence: [10:40](#)

Yeah, I mean I think basically the concept of renegade dreams as I conceive of it and still working, working on it is that, you know, what strikes me most is just a question of the future, the question of aspirations when it comes to people who are subject to injury, in particular. So on the one hand, I was faced with an ethnographic context in which I was developing close relationships with people who were paralyzed. And from an outside perspective, the question that one wants to ask are about like how one's hopes might've been dashed, how, you know, how do you cope, how do you imagine life now? What now? And I was struck by the juxtaposition one and the fact that, you know, people didn't want to again, dwell on what could be construed as negative aspects of their life. There was a kind of defiant optimism, but on the other hand there was a really urgent sense of I need to imagine a better future.

Laurence: [11:58](#)

Right? And so that was striking to me, but on the other hand, what was also striking was that the effort and the amount of time invested in imagining for a better future, we're on goals that would seem very modest, that on goals that would, that someone with a middle class sensibility would take for granted. That is people were creating programs and networks around trying to get kids to school safely, without getting shot. People were creating a lot of time and effort and investment and just trying to stop gun violence for one weekend, you know, and people were putting a lot of effort and investment and just trying to not get evicted from their homes. And so I wanted to

contrast this idea of dreaming that kind of connotes like the American dream of meritocracy and upward mobility that anyone supposedly can achieve to this kind of stark reality of the fact that some people put in so much hard work, so much effort, lose years from their lives organizing and planning just to make sure that their kid has a safe route to school. And so these were kind of, you know, dreams that were equally important as anyone's dreams, but I needed a qualifier for them, you know, they were defiant, and you know, and in terms of the fact that they resisted this idea of meritocracy. So for me, there were renegades dreams. They were dreams rooted in injury that try to imagine a way out of injury. Uh, and so that became the kind of crux of how I kind of describe the social phenomenon in the book.

- Langston Hughes: [13:59](#) What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun or fester like a sore? And then run. Does it stink like rotten meat or crust- and sugar-over like a syrupy sweet, maybe it just sags like a heavy load, or does it explode?
- Leniqueca: [14:29](#) So since the book, where have you taken this concept of injury?
- Laurence: [14:33](#) I can answer that in two ways. One way is that I've written about things that didn't make it into the book, but are from the same context of the community that I call Eastwood in the book. And secondly, tried to develop a kind of more trans-national notion of injury that kind of takes into account broader context in terms of countries and the networks that produce injury, right? So not just the US, not just Chicago, but kind of the militarization of policing that allows police officers who are trained in Chicago to then go in and fight on the war and terror and then come back to Chicago. So speaking on the, on the first notion, you know, I presented this AAA on the idea of becoming aggrieved, and this is a story about gun violence and mental illness that is rooted in the community that are called Eastwood. And based on a woman who was a staple of the community named Ms. Lonna.
- Laurence (Talk): [15:46](#) Pastor Scott and addressed her in sermon. Ms. Lonna has got more sense than any of the so-called violence activists that I know -- she doesn't hold a rally and then feel good about herself. She wants everybody everyday about the consequences of the bullet. How many in the congregation, the pastor wanted to know, could claim they did the same?
- Laurence: [16:09](#) In the paper, and then the article that the paper I gave was an excerpt of, I tried to distinguish between this idea of madness in which someone cannot kind of get over something to the point

that they are driven into a psychotic state to the notion of grief, which is seen as something that you can overcome, right? So in kind of the Freudian sense to grieve for something is a temporary state. There is this idea that you might, understandably grieve a death, but eventually you will get over that grief and maintain a normal life. Whereas someone who's driven mad, um, there's, there's no expectation that they can get over it and that's why it's seen as psychotic or dysfunctional. But I try to develop a concept of madness that doesn't connote a dysfunction or a pathology, but also signals a justifiable anger that people mobilize politically.

Laurence: [17:21](#) In other words, people respect a woman that I described named Ms. Lonna because she's mad that her son died. Like she's angry and they perceive that anger as justifiable and they perceive it as something that people shouldn't get over. And that's why they mobilize efforts to help her, and that's why they mobilize efforts to care for her in a way that doesn't strip her of her right to be angry in the second sense, I'm working on a book that has to do with the history of police torture in Chicago and it kind of traces the linkages between police officers and Chicago as they develop military careers and bring back their techniques of torture to Chicago and at times for a long time it wasn't recognized as torture in Chicago even though it was the same techniques that officers had used in Vietnam and later in places like Guantanamo Bay. So part of it is what allows torture to be legible and in certain places on certain populations and not others. Um, but, but the other question is how do we trace these circulations of injury, these circuits of injury? And so that's kind of two directions that I've tried to take the concept of injury since the book.

Leniqueca: [18:48](#) So before we end, I just want to take it in a slightly different direction, but something that was also really important in the book and article of leading up to the book, right? And it's about shoe game and shoe-capital, and I feel like before we leave it'd be nice for the audience to know about your shoe game too and what you have, what you need to cop because we talked a little about what people need to cop. So it's like what's your shoe?

Laurence: [19:18](#) Well, let's see, right now I'm wearing some black huaraches. I mean I like classic shoes, you know, she's stood the test of time, especially in terms of tennis shoes or gym shoes as it will be in Chicago. But you know, it's an interesting question because you know, ethnographically speaking, people look at you, right? And they, they determine how they're going to interact with you in relation to a lot of things, how you talk, how you look, what you wear. And being in Chicago and coming from the University of

Chicago and I'm moving into this neighborhood, there was a lot of that, you know, just sizing-up, on the one hand from the people who are wanting to build relationships within the community. On the other hand, it was the failing that, like the police didn't know the difference, but people did. So that juxtaposition gave a kind of attention to like what people noticed about me, you know, and shoes were one thing that they noticed about me and that they talked about amongst themselves.

Laurence: [20:26](#)

And you know, since the idea of gang violence is so over-determined, like, people talk about it so often when you're researching it, there is um, people have canned answers. They have answers that they've said a million times. So they're not interesting because they're not, they're just saying something, and saying something that is like really cliché a lot of times. Like, "oh, there's no role models for these kids," "they're growing up in broken homes," "educations bad," that's responsible for gang violence. And so, you know, doing research with gangs and on the question of violence, one has to figure out other ways to talk about the issue and other proxies like, what represents gang violence? What are people talking about when they really mean gang violence? And shoes was one thing that like, it was a proxy for a lot of things in that community -- it was a proxy for the way that generations dealt with each other, in the sense that older generation start that, you know, younger ones only cared about shoes, but it was a way to talk about their anxieties and the way they talk about what they valued in a way to talk about the fear of the society that the community wouldn't reproduce itself. And so, you know, talking about asking people about their shoes kind of brought back a lot of memories, a lot of what I call a nostalgia and the book, um, for like how the community once was and how it should be. And I think that's the interesting thing about like our material objects and what they invoke and what they represent and how they kind of entailed these multiple layers of meaning that really bring nuance to the social categories that we presumed to know about.

Leniqueca: [22:27](#)

So I just want to thank you for your time, Dr. Laurence Ralph, and thanks for talking to us about your work.

Laurence: [22:33](#)

My pleasure, any time.

Arjun: [22:50](#)

Thanks to all of our dedicated listeners for joining us on this journey, in season one of Anthropological Airwaves. And I really hope you'll join us again for season two, which should be coming soon enough, with brand new interviews with scholars

from all over the four fields, engaging with the public and thinking about how we can continue to make anthropology matter.