

Deborah Thomas: [00:00](#) Hello, my name is Deborah Thomas, Editor-in-Chief of American Anthropologist, and this is Anthropological Airwaves.

Kyle Olson: [00:19](#) Welcome to Anthropological Airwaves. My name is Kyle Olson, your host for this episode. This time we have two interviews to share with you. The first is between Sara Rendell, an MD PhD student in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, and professor Adia Benton of Northwestern, and the second is with Sharon Jacobs, a graduate student in linguistic anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and Professor Miriam Ticktin from the New School. Both of these conversations concern anthropology's relationship with its different audiences on the one hand and to the discourses and practices of humanitarianism on the other. Together they show us how anthropologists can fruitfully intervene in pressing debates and use our particular tools to help others, both through our writing for public audiences and directly through our research practice. The major theme that ties these two interviews together is that both interrogate the binary thinking that can and does repeatedly crop up in humanitarian discourse and lucidly demonstrate how these binaries reproduce the injustices that humanitarianism is supposed to redress. These binaries, figure people into different roles -- such as rescuer and rescued, refugee or migrant, deserving versus undeserving -- figurations, which often as not reinscribe rather than challenge white supremacist relations of power at a variety of scales. This sobering conversation highlights the power of images, tropes, and unintended consequences and should spur reflection on anthropologists responsibilities, vis a vis both public discourse more broadly and our interlocutors more specifically, I hope it is as thought provoking for all of you as it has been for us.

Sarah Rendell: [01:50](#) Hi, I'm Sara Rendell and I'm here with Adia Benton... Adia, my first question for you, since you're currently co-editor of the Public Anthropology section of American Anthropologist, how do you think about anthropology's audiences? In other words, how do you reckon with audience as you're writing, tweeting, making, and sharing multimedia forms and also evaluating public anthropological work?

Adia Benton: [02:17](#) Hmm, that's really interesting. So Yarimar [Bonilla] and I kind of worked through what we thought of our public was, and we thought it would be people who are interested in some kind of critical analysis that anthropologists are good at, about current events. So for example, we have done some things about the elections, healthcare. We've looked at congressional spending on a variety of things like climate change and so some of those things haven't come out yet, but we actually, one of our big

series that we put out is de-provincializing the sustainable development goals, which actually focuses on those 17 goals and whether the US is what it looks like it's doing -- is it doing well, on a sort of global report card. Those kinds of things that actually are relevant and interesting to people, in terms of their commitments, their own political commitments about all of those issues.

- Adia Benton: [03:17](#) So, we're looking forward to getting some really interesting essays. They're short, short essays on gender based violence, we have one up on healthcare, we have a few coming out on natural disasters and natural disasters in air quotes because they're not quite natural as you well know. So we think about an educated public, or a curious public, and that, and I think sometimes we can't anticipate what that public might look like. We can only anticipate that there are people who are possibly interested in these things, that they'll read these things and they'll actually click through and learn more.
- Sarah Rendell: [03:59](#) So, as you're saying that, I'm also thinking about how curiosity has a timeline or at least a pace, and I think that one of anthropology's strengths as a discipline is that we slow down and critique things that are normally being taken up and carried forward. Um, so I'm wondering, to be relevant to broader publics or to stimulate curiosity, does anthropology need to have a different pace?
- Adia Benton: [04:25](#) You know, I think there is a time for everything, no pun intended. Right? So let's just say that, I think there's a time for various kinds of information and analysis, right? So there's some things that we're quite practiced at. So even if we, for some of our own personal research or research that we're interested in developing the depth for, we take our time. That's part of the whole thing. Spending the time, learning the people, learning the thing that folks are interested in, learning the mechanisms, the networks, whatever it is. But when we do this, we're doing analysis every day, and, there are certain things that we can look at or situations we can understand or interpret in the moment. And so, in other words, we practice this all the time.
- Adia Benton: [05:14](#) We process it all the time and sometimes it's time to talk about those things in the moment and sometimes we have to sort of wait and see. The pace of the work I think is dependent upon the thing, the issue at hand. So for example, it was, I would say it was very easy for me to comment upon the health system of Sierra Leone during the Ebola crisis. Having been there for several years and having continued to work and read about those things. Now, could I have explained all that was wrong or

right about the Ebola response? No, I couldn't have, it would have taken witnessing that responding over two years to be able to do that and then another year to write about it, right, another year to work through all of the arguments. And so I think there are different kinds of different scales, different temporalities always at play and it is clear when you have the time to think about something, and it's clear I think when someone has taken this sort of long, deep time to really analyze and learn something, I think it's really, you know, a hot take is that take for a reason. It's like fresh out of the pan, and sometimes not very delicious. Sometimes it's not even took...

Adia Benton:

[06:36](#)

You know, actually I was thinking of a really good case of this... In the aftermath of the Trump election, for some reason we're getting this kind of bombarded with the sort of: "let's look into the minds of the Trump voter, the Trump supporter" or whatever. They always go to the same town and talk to the same people and they're like, how do you feel now? How you feeling about this thing now? And it's still the same. My point being though is there were these two articles about. I'm actually, there are multiple articles about white supremacists. There was one that came out in the New York Times where everyone is really upset because the person went, did the article, interviewed the same guy, came out with nothing new and he didn't talk about the white supremacist group that he worked with. He didn't talk about the evolution of that group. He didn't talk about its reach, he didn't talk about all of these really critical things. A few months earlier, there was a Derrick Black article, the guy who I think, his father was the founder of the Storm Front and he was the sort of white supremacists prodigy. They talk about his transformation into someone who sort of, I guess at this point, [is] an anti-racist, or at least an anti-white-nationalist... But they talk about it! They talk about the ideology of the Storm Front. They talk about it took to cultivate, like how do you cultivate a following, how do you generate a sort of an ideology, how do you generate propaganda, how do you, how do you bring people into the fold, how do you reproduce this model in different kinds of places? And it was a very different kind of article, but it also clearly took a lot more time.

Adia Benton:

[08:10](#)

That's the one that sticks, the one that was written and published in the New York Times, that [one] looked like it was done in a couple of weeks.... just gets sort of chalked up to being part of the New York Times fascination with white supremacy. It doesn't stay as a memorable story. It's just a trope. It's a repetitive motion that the New York Times is doing. It's spinning its wheels, but that one piece in the Washington

Post is going to stand on its own in the weeks forward as people continue to write about white nationalists as if they're some sort of foreign alien invader. So that's the, I think an example of, what else sort of deep analysis and deep curiosity produces. It's a very different thing.

Sarah Rendell: [09:01](#) Yeah. Which in this example, it doesn't depend on moving super slow/super fast as much as it does on a certain way of looking, seeing, asking, imagining...

Adia Benton: [09:12](#) Right. I think there's a question of depth. Like how deep can you go? Lots of people can just sort of gather quotes and like and pull something together. But this is about like, okay, so asking the why and why and why and trying to find all the people who might connect those dots and drawing that story out. So I think depth rather than breadth is a really large part of this.

Sarah Rendell: [09:37](#) That point about depth rather than breadth actually makes me think about one of the pieces you've written that, this is your article called "Risky Business" that worked through the realm of images to actually bring your readers into a depth of analysis of humanitarian interventions that you've seen have been avoided. Like the stuff has been kind of like avoided or overlooked in critiques of humanitarianism. And so in this piece you use risk as a central analytic with which to tell a visual story. And in this story you illustrate how designation of risk with racist notions of contagion and danger or like rescue and risk constructs, white moral superiority and also builds racial inequality of lives within humanitarianism. And your argument is that we can't talk about different binaries that emerge and humanitarian interventions without seeing how these are foundationally white supremacist in their organization. And I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your choice to use images to interrogate the unnamed racial ordering of humanitarian interventions.

Adia Benton: [10:58](#) What happened is I started with an image. So I, as you know, I worked in Sierra Leone and I had like a Google alert on, for Sierra Leone, and this was when I was writing my dissertation. And so of course I'm like, what's going on? And did something completely change? That would totally take my dissertation off the rails... And I had to give a talk so I was giving a talk and I think in my department or somewhere else and so I was like, oh, what am I going to do? I have this picture that I'm so puzzled by. And the picture was of Selma Hayek, breastfeeding a black baby, a Sierra Leonean baby. I don't know if it was a picture as much as it was the outrage machine generating a visual for me, but I found the video, I think it was on ABC and I took a

screenshot and I was like, well, what, why are people so infuriated about this?

- Adia Benton: [11:51](#) Or why are people sort of freaking out? Is it because it's Salma Hayek and her breasts and people love those, or is it about, you know, something else? And obviously they kind of focused on this act, you know, so it was like she was both caregiving and she was saving a life, but she was also putting her breast in a black baby's mouth. Like what is up with that, you know?? She just had her own kid and, and so there's this whole thing about like this reverse sort of nanny, like sort of wet nurse?
- Sarah Rendell: [12:24](#) Wet nurses, isn't it?
- Adia Benton: [12:25](#) Yeah, like reverse in the sense that usually the racial, the racial optic, it's usually black or brown women's bodies to support the nutrition of a white baby.... That's often the image I've seen. And so, um, you know, I was sort of interested in the outrage, the sort of repulsion, the... or "hey, look at what this amazing thing that she's doing. It's beautiful."
- Adia Benton: [12:50](#) But it was couched in, oh, she went to Sierra Leone to talk about neonatal tetanus and also to save lives, as a part of her work as a UNICEF spokesperson. And so I was intrigued by this idea that she was being called a humanitarian, not only for traveling, you know, sort of making the "treacherous" journey to Sierra Leone, which they made very clear that that's what you're saying: "Look at her, look at the beautiful starlet going into the depths of, you know, the white man's grave," which is what Sierra Leone was called in the 1700-1800s. And then she does this other risky thing. In fact, that was the headline in some things, "oh, breastfeeding someone else's baby doesn't hurt you." And so I was really intrigued by that, but then I was also intrigued by the power of that image to generate that response and what that response, what does that response tell me about the directionality of this thing?
- Adia Benton: [13:44](#) And so I was talking to this friend again, like sort of panicking about a paper while I'm in paradise. And she said, "if this had been me, if that was my baby, I would be really annoyed that this random, like random foreign lady stuck her boob in his mouth. I'd be kind of annoyed, like kind of gross." I said, "oh, that's really interesting because you don't see that in the reports at all." And so I kind of started asking, okay, so what is that about? And why is not that, this is an innocent child, a baby, usually the babies are innocent. How is it that he's supposed to be posing risk to her and why is that the frame or why is it all about, why is it all about her and and when he does

figure into it, it's not only that he might be risky, but it's also that he's being saved and so that's the only way he kind of functions in this piece.

Adia Benton: [14:36](#) And so after that the same friend sent me because I was not in Boston at the time, but would be heading back, the cover of the Boston Globe and I was like, what is this? And it was a baby being given, receiving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation from a white firefighter in Boston in 1968, which was a year of racial turmoil, particularly in Boston. And this was in Roxbury, this is a housing project that primarily had black occupants, but it was about the reunion of these two people. And what was really interesting about it was they were, so the reason that this was on the front page was because someone found the picture in the archives and said, "does anyone know who this guy is? And does anyone know who this girl is? Does anyone know if they're still alive? We found it. It's extraordinary." What's extraordinary about it,

Sarah Rendell: [15:35](#) What's extraordinary about a fireman doing his job?

Adia Benton: [15:40](#) And so that again became my thing, like why is it so extraordinary that he is doing his job? And, and you know, it's, I think there's something to be said about the fact that a lot of black observers that I talked to said "it's really cool that he would do that." You know, like sometimes we think that they're not going to come and save us one piece. But the other side is a whole look. Firefighters are good people look at what he's doing. Of course when they interviewed him he was like "I was doin' my job." But then. But then they asked him, do blood, do white people, white people go into this neighborhood? Nope. Sure wouldn't. And so it was a really. Again, it was the sort of, this guy's interesting, the sort of white man's grave or something in the same kind of, which I found odd because right, a firefighter's supposed to be saving everyone, but the idea that there is a kind of differential valuing of life and that really, that the rescue is the risk, I think is really significant, and something that seemed to be coming out of these photos, not just the photos themselves, but the circulations and the comments and the ways that people responded to them. The way the stories that they told about those images, the curation, I guess that they were doing like, because I kept looking through forums and see how people talked about this thing and it was always really odd. They were like, these really weird, so weird, racial jokes. Like, oh, he saved her life and then she stole his wallet.

Adia Benton: [17:11](#) And so there's like all of these really interesting kind of racial... there's racializing happening in the photo, but racializing also

happening in response to them, right, often related to risk and rescue and often racializing the notions of risk. And the notions of rescues, of who can be saved and who can be doing the saving, whose lives are put at risk, whose lives are perceived to be at risk at the moment of encounter. So these were the broad themes or questions that emerged from not only talking to people or, reading what people say about those images, but reading those images together and then thinking through all of the ways that those same kinds of dynamics played out in these settings that I lived in, where the humanitarian is supposed to be. Like the humanitarian act itself is a risky act because of where one goes and who one saves.

Sarah Rendell: [18:09](#)

And who's the one going?

Adia Benton: [18:11](#)

Right, who's going and who's saving.

Sarah Rendell: [18:14](#)

And one of one of the things that, that becomes so clear in your analysis because you're working with these images that you know, are connected through babies. And like what black babies, like make audiences say, do think -- the idea that a neonate, a newborn, black baby could pose a risk to Salma Hayek is laughable. But there's also something that happens in the images, if I remember right, image with the firefighter from 1968, giving mouth to mouth resuscitation to the baby in Roxbury, you could sort of see the mother in the background, but she was a little bit blurred. And then with Salma Hayek's breast feeding the baby in Sierra Leone, we have no idea where the mother is. So I'm wondering if like is built in with this risk and rescue, there's an erasure of black motherhood in some way, or I guess a disregard for it, or an ambivalence?

Adia Benton: [19:17](#)

I think that's right. I actually think, I think it's, it could be disregard, but certainly the background, right? So however the black mother fits in, she's in the background and maybe helplessly watching. And so yeah, so I wasn't sure what to do with that. So I actually, I think woman in the firefighter photo might not have been the mother but another relative, I think is what I remember from the story that, you know, there's a way, there's a way in this thing where the mom is either just sort of absent again in and possibly in the background and certainly not, I'm not intervening, maybe even the cause, right? So maybe even the cause for the distress and for the need to rescue because I think that's also one of the controversies around Salma Hayek. It's like, so where is the mom?

Adia Benton: [20:12](#)

She's incapable of feeding her own child? She can't do it herself? And I believe that's what the story was. Um, which to

me would say, okay, so she's not eating? Does she have a pituitary tumor? What's going on with mom? I wasn't sure. I also felt like there's a question of like, so one thing that I remember thinking, speaking of moms, because Salma Hayek was, and still is a mom, but she's an -- I've had the question asked and I address it in the article to some extent -- but is she white??

Sarah Rendell: [20:51](#)

Mmm, yeah, how is whiteness operating here?

Adia Benton: [20:53](#)

Well I guess she is rendered white, even though she always makes these jokes about how she seemed ridiculous with her... she called herself a Mexican jumping bean. I know, right? I just thought that was a really interesting thing. But she also talks about like she, she rarely addresses kind of the racial dimensions, but they're obviously sort of national and ethnic, um, determinations made about her because she's a Lebanese Mexican, Mexican, Lebanese. And so, uh, where did it go with that? Basically: how are people being racialized in these images and what that says about motherhood? I think are very significant dimensions when, when you're talking about babies and there's no way you can ever talk about a baby without also thinking about parents or moms. Actually, there are no dads. There's certainly no dads. The moms are negligent, but the dad, the dad's don't even exist. Which I think is also another interesting dimension to think about when babies are involved, a lot that you can think about babies as innocence, almost kind of like they, they produce more sort of analytical questions about networks and kin and relationships and care that I think other kinds of images or other kinds of beings might not, which is something I did think about this whole like what is it about the baby that makes it such a compelling, a compelling object of sympathy.

Adia Benton: [22:31](#)

I don't want to call babies objects, but to some extent they don't have inner lives in these imaginings. They don't have any agency. They're simply innocence and they're simply victims and they're simply all of these things. I know it sounds... actually, I feel like I might be sounding crazy, talking about babies' inner lives, but you know...

Sarah Rendell: [22:55](#)

I think what you're saying is, that to produce the rescue humanitarian narrative, there needs to be an object receiving that rescue intervention that can both be deserving of the intervention, like be deemed deserving, but also produce enough of a threat to render the intervention heroic. And then the other component is like, there shouldn't be any protest or reaction from the recipient. So I don't think that you're saying

babies are objects, but you are saying something really important about the extent to which the receiver of this kind of racialized aid, or you know, rescue intervention is supposed to be a silent noncritical receiver. And babies do that wel...

- Adia Benton: [23:40](#) Or infantilized... I remember often talking to people, especially in refugee camps or in these different kinds of aid situations that I worked in, and having someone say, "Oh, well I felt like he treated me like a boy or a small child." Or, "they're treating us like children." And so this sort of infantilization, actually is, I think, part of the process. Again, it depends on how you think of what you think of infants and how and what and what, what that means culturally, but I do think that there is something to this. Yeah, there's something about the baby, the baby figure that I think also says other things or has other implications for analysis.
- Sarah Rendell: [24:30](#) So, I think our time with you is coming to a close. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us, especially during this busy conference season.
- Sharon Jacobs: [24:52](#) I'm Sharon Jacobs, I'm here at the New School for Social Research in New York City with Dr Miriam Ticktin. So Dr. Ticktin, outside of your academic work, you've written pieces for public audiences and also done political work with the new sanctuary movement as well as advocacy groups for undocumented migrants in France. So what do you in particular as an anthropologist bring to this kind of grassroots media and organizing work?
- Miriam Ticktin: [25:16](#) That's a great question. I think it depends on the case, what you bring to it wouldn't anthropologists can bring to organizing your activist work. I mean the first in the case of my book and the work I was doing with the sans papiers in France, I felt like I worked with the organizers but I could bring a broader perspective to it because I had the time to look at and map out all the different actors that were involved... So when they -- some of the activists -- asked me to do an evaluation of their practice, I felt like I had a different stance and a different ability to stand back and give some knowledge about whether their activism was working or not in the ways that they wanted it to. And then ultimately I think anthropologists, when you map something, you try to come at the ethnographic question from the side, not directly right on. In that sense, I didn't want to do exactly what the activists were doing because they know much more than I could ever know. So you have to ask the question slightly differently. You know, why are the sans papiers organizing in this way? What are the terms they're using and so

on? That's what brought me to the question of suffering and humanitarianism. It's not because they themselves for organizing around that, but I realized how prominently it figured... So one can use that and go back and say actually, you know, it might be working in the short term, but maybe your long-term strategy is not exactly what you would want it to be. I think anthropology can bring that.

Miriam Ticktin: [26:47](#)

With the sanctuary movement, I feel I now can bring my knowledge of humanitarianism and the history of humanitarianism and how it interfaced into the concept and practice of sanctuary. So I bring both my kind of experience and the method of anthropology, but again, I feel like it's about short-term and long-term goals. So on the one hand I might be questioning how useful the concept of sanctuary is and what its limits are. On the other hand, I can be fully involved in the politics of sanctuary and saying, I don't want people to be deported right now and I will help however I can to stop that. While you're also evaluating whether sanctuary is the right way to do that, so I think that they, you can be acting both at the, in the short term and the long term and they can sometimes be contradictory and when one stops acting in a certain way in the short term because one has knowledge of the long-term is I think really the question I do. Stop. Do I stop with sanctuary now knowing that it might have its limits. I'm not sure...

Sharon Jacobs: [27:42](#)

I'm going to turn to some of your earlier work, in particular, your book "Casualties of Care" in 2011, the year that it was published, and thinking with the long-term somewhat, this book came out four years before the so called European migration crisis. In the book, you identify what you call an anti-politics of care, where material rights are granted to individuals on the basis of their ability to conform to this sort of figure of morally legitimate suffering. So since the time that this book came out, we've seen obviously increases in the number of people who are entering Europe as well as increases in reactionary, anti-immigration attitudes. So if you were working on casualties of care, if you were returning to some of these issues today, how would the book be different? How would your process, or the things that you're thinking about be different today?

Miriam Ticktin: [28:34](#)

Yeah, I do think about that a lot. So partly, you know, I know it's called, you know, a refugee crisis, and I know anthropologists question that, but I really do want to say this has been going on for a long time and yes the numbers are higher, but when I was doing the research at the end of the 1990s was also seen as a crisis. So I think this periodization of Oh, it's a crisis. Oh my God, people are coming in, has to be put in context. That said, I do

think it's a different world and I do think in the 1990s at least, there was a commitment to humanitarian practices and to a humanitarian ethics. Even if you know somebody like Nicolas Sarkozy at the time, you know, before he became the president, was trying to undermine it. There were still an explicit commitment to humanitarianism and as I was doing my research, it was gradually getting eroded and undermined and the people I worked with kind of bemoaned this loss of the belief in the humanitarian ethic. And now I think it's fully lost. I mean, it's not that people don't use the language, but that it's been so blended with militarism, right? That whatever that humanitarian ethic was, I think in the nineties, is a different version today.

Miriam Ticktin: [29:50](#)

Yeah. And so, you know, patrol, and the waters, and the name of humanitarianism. But of course that is also about the surveillance, right? FRONTEX says it's humanitarian, but really it's about stopping people from getting into Europe. So they're so blended that I think it's, again, a different kind of a moment, but I also want to say that the critiques of humanitarianism, from my book, but lots of others too, were actually also taken on board, so humanitarians do act differently and other people act differently in relation to humanitarians, I think because of the critiques that they were issued at that time of the unintended consequences of what they were doing. So again, humanitarians and humanitarianism has remade itself in relation to a larger political circumstances, but also in relation to the critiques of what it was getting wrong.

Sharon Jacobs: [30:41](#)

To follow up on that really quickly, do you see any particular ethic coming in solidarity work with migrants in Europe today that is coming to replace or kind of overcome the humanitarianism that you were studying in the nineties?

Miriam Ticktin: [30:54](#)

Mmm, Yes. So that's the big question. I get a lot of articles to review that are trying to evaluate this I think, and some of the arguments say, oh, this new volunteerism is not humanitarian. I actually find that anthropologists, and many people, are committed to saving humanitarianism. They really want to reestablish a reinvigorated, to give it more hope. On the other hand, I do think with the solidarity work and the open borders movement, that doesn't need to be the same as humanitarianism. And I think there are a lot of versions of new politics that, that use some of the techniques of humanitarianism -- that is being present when people land on shore and [to] respond with the material goods that people need and yet understand themselves as solidararians, right? And [to] think in the long term and think about systemic political

change, not just about immediate bodily needs. Right? And it's not necessarily with an ethic of benevolence or compassion, but rather with this idea that, okay, we're trying to remake the world, all of us together. I don't know how successful it is. I think that gets caught up in, and it's hard not to get caught up in the, in the infrastructures of humanitarianism. But I do think that there are no borders and open borders and sanctuary movements that are challenging these kinds of humanitarian ethics.

Sharon Jacobs:

[32:22](#)

I'm going to turn the focus a little bit from Europe to the discourse around immigration in the United States today. So thinking about the way that the US has dealt with immigration and has been trying to prevent non-citizens from exercising their right to asylum, we've seen a sort of fluctuation between policies that separate family members in detention, possibly deporting parents while keeping their children, and allowing them to enter the US versus policy is to detain families together, but indefinitely. And I'm thinking, in particular, of the trump administration, but we can also of course think about how trump is in many ways in keeping with an American tradition of surveillance and physical control over immigrants. So some of your more recent work has considered innocence and containment as moral concepts that tend to structure Western political discourse. So how might you bring these concepts of innocence and containment to bear on the twin, but somewhat opposite policies of family separation and detention?

Miriam Ticktin:

[33:28](#)

Great. Yeah, I mean, I think my answer would be part of your question, which I think is, your question puts innocence and containment together and I think that's exactly right. So in the sense that they're both about purity, right? So containment is one response to the idea of others as contagious or invasive or, or so on, like put them in detention centers, put them in prisons, deport them, get them out, get them out of this body politic, which they're going to contaminate. So one answer is to kind of contain them. The other answer is to parse and to sort and to decide which ones are going to be not contagious, as it were, and not going to be a threat to the body politic. And that's an innocence is used as the strategy to parse and evaluate. And so in that case, okay, children are innocent, we'll take them out and let them be in the world and therefore they will not be held with their parents in detention. But, you know, they're part of the same strategy which is basically keep out these people who are threatening to us. So either we see children as part of the threat or we separate them out. But effectively it's all about these ideas of a threat, invasiveness,

and so on. And the idea that we want to keep something pure. So, I would say that, you know, if you're going to move beyond those kinds of politics, you have to get rid of both of those strategies, right? This idea of using innocence as way to separate out deserving or undeserving refugee versus economic migrant, child versus adolescent, whatever, have to get rid of that altogether and get rid of the policies of containment imprisonment, which of course are part of the larger prison industrial complex. And I think rather than go with those, we have to go with ideas of contamination that were all contaminated. There is no such thing as purity. The opposite of innocence is not guilty. It's basically contamination or it's impurity, or it's not innocence. And I think that's where we have to go and just say it's an incredibly messy, none innocent world. And that we have to start with that as our base point and assume that were already living in that kind of a world.

Sharon Jacobs: [35:49](#)

You've also spoken a little bit about, in your written academic works about Americans' sort of reluctance to talk about racial injustice and belief in a post-racial future as another kind of innocence, so I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to that dimension of the racialized connection with innocence.

Miriam Ticktin: [36:08](#)

Yeah. So obviously one of them is this history of race in childhood and children. The definition of it. I mean the other one is stated very clearly by James Baldwin when he talks about the crime of the American people, meaning the white folks as being the crime of claim claiming innocence, you know, he's saying that is the problem that they, after all they have done still claim to be innocent! And it's in that sense, it's a willingness to not know, and innocence has its roots in, in these young -- the Latin etymology of it is kind of, you know, in a sense, not to harm, inno cere, not to know. And in this case I think it draws on the willingness not to know -- I don't want to know about the racial hierarchies of which I am a part in which I reproduce in my daily life. That's, I think where it comes from, the idea that we could have post-racial realities. I think now everybody knows it's absurd, but even during the time of Obama, it was absurd, obviously. And I think again, Baldwin points that out ages ago and we're just seeing it in its full color right now. But yes, I do think innocence in that sense is one way that people claim to enact power by ignoring their race, racial privilege or by using their racial privilege and pretending not to acknowledge it.

Sharon Jacobs: [37:41](#)

So one thing that the sort of American disavowal of race talk might facilitate is what we saw recently with the cabinet confirmation hearings where this white man who's been accused of sexual assault, and his followers are essentially able

to say, oh, he was a boy. He was the innocent one here. He was a child. The figure of innocence, essentially. Whereas we've seen in the past few years, so many black children being gunned down by police being seen not as children, but as figures of danger and threat. So I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to this identification or this connection.

Miriam Ticktin:

[38:29](#)

Yes. It's so powerfully articulated by that example, the ways in which only some people can harness innocence, and the way to power is to harness innocence: "I didn't know. I don't remember. I didn't do it. It wasn't me." And you're completely right. One way to, to cast him as innocent was by saying that he was not an adult at that time, therefore he was not fully knowing. He was naive. He can't be held responsible for it. Of course, it's not just a race but class. I mean he's the elite of the elite, right? And is able to claim it because of this. And I think putting it in relation to black boys is, you know, super revealing. The other thing though is that of course the gendered dynamics of this, which is that innocence is also defined against sexuality, right? For Women. So for women, Innocence Means Sexual Innocence. So, um, you know, she (Blasie Ford) was never able to claim innocence and she didn't even try, but that's the nature of the concept, which is that he can use it even though it was to many of us, blatantly absurd, but she never even had the chance to, to mobilize it because it has been constructed as a term against women's sexual being. Rape is always a questioning of the innocence of women, right? There's always an assumption starts from their lack of innocence, right? And the innocence of the men, right? Which we just saw...

Kyle Olson:

[40:15](#)

Thank you all so much for listening and a special thanks to our interviewers, Sara Rendall and Sharon Jacobs and our upcoming episodes. We'll be speaking with Xochitl Marsili-Vargas and Carolyn Sufrin about anthropology and the clinic, as well as Laura Kunreuther and Ayce Cubukcu modes of democratic subjectivity, so be on the lookout for those over the next few months. Until then, don't forget to rate and review us wherever you get your podcasts and to tell your friends, colleagues, and students about the great work our guests are doing. Take care and we'll be with you again soon.