

From Seeking Shelter to Visions of Justice: Relating the Private to the Public

Dr. Darcy Alexandra is a researcher and lecturer at the Institute for Social Anthropology at the University of Bern. She combines her wide-ranging expertise on filmmaking, storytelling, poetry, photography, writing, and activism to an engaged scholarship, which is highly valued by her students.

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Darcy Alexandra focuses her research on the lived experiences of asylum seekers, the politics of storytelling, and co-creative documentary making. Her interest is rooted in her own life, she explains. She grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area in a conservative home, where her father's word was the law. "I can look back at my father now and think that he was really exemplary of toxic masculinity." As a survivor of domestic violence, Alexandra chose an unusual route to safety. She became an exchange student in a small town in Argentina, an experience that would become momentous. "For the first time, I experienced a father who was gentle, and kind, and who had different ideas about masculinity. For me, seeking shelter and finding it, saved my life."

This experience of finding shelter led her to work with Central American refugees fleeing war. Consequently, she became increasingly interested in questions of social justice and intersectionality and began Latin American Studies. Thinkers such as Audre Lorde and Claribel Alegria were an important inspiration in that period, one that has not ceased to nourish her: "Poetry helps me solve my deeper questions. At two in the morning when I can't sleep, I don't read Foucault but I do read Adrienne Rich." After working in the field of human rights and education for ten years, Alexandra received her MA in anthropology of education for which she studied bilingual literacy acquisition using visual methods. She felt dissatisfied by the untapped potential of audiovisual storytelling in science: "You would just go in the room, put the camera anywhere and turn it on. And this raised a lot of questions. How should shots be framed and what are we looking for? When do we turn the camera on and what are the ethics of this?" She continued her studies at the Story Center in Berkeley and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. She then completed her PhD thesis "Visualizing Migrant Voices: Co-Creative Documentary and the Politics of Listening" at the Center for Socially Engaged Practice Based Research in Dublin. Under her mentorship, asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants co-produced fourteen documentary essays, using photographs, videos, drawings, audio files, among other sources, of which many are on her website. Alexandra states that "all elements of the storytelling process facilitate a type of engagement that is unparalleled. I don't have the same experience using other methods." Although



she is clear, that it's not the right approach for every context, she is convinced by its power to build long-term relationships across communities. One gets the chance to learn from one's participants in ways that are unlikely in other contexts, she adds.

Currently, Alexandra is working on questions of how to think and theorize about climate change without an anthropocentric focus. In this challenging project, Haraway, Tsing, de la Cadena, and Kohn are useful inspirations to her. Drawing on their contributions, she is planning to do research on the US Mexican borderlands, a heavily objectified region about which only few stories are told with complexity, as she argues. Despite the importance to talk about white supremacist vigilantes and the increasing militarization of the border, she holds that this is only one part of the bigger picture. Tucson, the UNESCO City of Gastronomy, for instance, is one of the oldest consecutively farmed regions of North America. Its inhabitants have come up with creative practices of collective food production and distribution networks that work as financial support in times of urgency.

Alexandra emphasizes our interdependence in academia as knowledge is produced relationally. In her view, much can be gained if we stop working only on our own and begin to discuss and address questions interdisciplinarily. She questions the idea "that someone is thinking in a vacuum and has brilliant ideas coming into his head." She suggests developing more sustainable and healthy practices of community and learning.

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