

Gaslit Nation Transcript

15 November 2023

“The Authoritarian Voter Next Door”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/authoritarian-92911965>

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[[opening clip](#)]

Donald Trump (00:01:01):

President Xi is like central casting. There's nobody in Hollywood that can play the role of President Xi; the look, the strength, the voice. It's good to have a good relationship with Putin and Xi and all these people that have lots of nuclear weapons. And Kim Jung-Un I had a good relationship with. He's a tough, smart guy.

[theme music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa (00:01:26):

Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your host, Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, the film, the Kremlin and its useful idiots do not want you to see, so be sure to watch it, especially since November, 2023 marks the 90th anniversary of the little known subject that is the dramatic heart of the film, and that is the Holodomor; Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine. It's the 90th anniversary of this little known genocide, which the Jewish/Polish human rights lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, who coined the word genocide, held up as the classic example of Soviet genocide, which is repeating today under Putin. Alright everyone, so lots to cover. My voice is a bit hoarse because I was playing monster with my kids. I'm an amazing monster, if you don't know that already, where I was just roaring a little too loud and now I've lost my voice. But it was worth it.

Andrea Chalupa (00:02:32):

So our opening clip, speaking of monsters, was Donald Trump campaigning in New Hampshire, firing up the authoritarian voter. Yes, there are people who live among us, who have always lived among us. They may even look like us, especially if you're white. And they sincerely want a strongman in power because why? Because that will show them; them being, let's say for example, a rich Black woman driving a Lexus. “Oh, you think you're better than me? I'll show you.” That's the authoritarian voter. Yes, it really is that simple. So as you know, as discussed on last week's bonus episode, Trump has a blueprint to dismantle democracy from within and it's a lot like the strategy Hitler used to turn Germany into a dictatorship in only six months. And during that time, one of the first things Hitler did within weeks of coming to power, he started building his first concentration camp.

Andrea Chalupa (00:03:36):

So the Holocaust got started within weeks of Hitler coming to power. That was Hitler's second coup. It was his second coup. So Trump failed, like Hitler, at the first coup and he plans to win with his second coup. This is not a drill. He should be in prison. We're going to get into this not just in this episode for a bit, but go back to our transcript page, future episodes. This is why this show exists. Trump obviously

wants the same thing here. He plans to purge—this has all been reported, obviously, you know by now it's called Project 25—he plans to purge traditionally protected civil servant jobs, install around 54,000 loyalists (he's already building names of people), he plans to build massive deportation camps for millions of immigrants, and of course his political enemies of all backgrounds, whether they're here as immigrants, asylum seekers, or just podcast hosts in Brooklyn, they will find themselves there too.

Andrea Chalupa (00:04:48):

He plans to weaponize the DOJ again, but even more so. And basically just be a dictator like he's always dreamed of becoming. He's been very clear about these plans. This Project 25, this dismantling of American democracy blueprint was in motion in 2020. We'd all be living under this already if he had gotten away with January 6th. And if he gets in again, it's going to be very difficult to stop all this. You'll see Andrew Weissmann on MSNBC going, "I'm shocked" as all this is carried out. And the next thing you know, Andrew Weissmann's not there anymore because he's in a camp somewhere, but that's what we're headed towards. Our security forces, mainly the FBI and the Secret Service, they're already tainted with Trump lackeys. Trump is in good shape to succeed this time. So that more than anything explains the big blue wave we saw last week. Americans, since the original blue wave of 2018, Americans have been staying united on the all important grassroots state level to build a wall against Trump.

Andrea Chalupa (00:06:03):

And we here at Gaslit Nation, our community of listeners, we are an important part of that wall. I do believe if we keep this energy up, if we refuse to be complacent, we can do for our country what Merrick Garland refuses to do. We can meaningfully stop Trump and we can protect our democracy at least for another four years until we have to do it all again. And if it won't be Trump, it'll be someone like him because it's a cult. He's established a cult and that guarantees, unfortunately, succession. Death will not free us from this problem. Trump is up there in age. He shows his age. We're not going to be liberated once he's gone unfortunately.. There's too many that want to take that he's trained, allowed to come out. And our whole goal is to modernize the US government to get rid of these shackles once and for all.

Andrea Chalupa (00:06:57):

And we're going to be doing a series over the coming years looking at very specific ways on how to modernize the US government because that is the only way to Trump-proof our US government. Alright, so more on that in the year ahead, this very critical year for all of humanity. If you listen closely to the opening clip of this week's show, Trump is also blatantly pushing Kremlin nuclear blackmail. Putin of course is the Botoxed face of Russia's genocidal imperialism, run by a KGB dictatorship, and it effectively uses nuclear war saber rattling, which spooks the democratic alliance, delaying much-needed aid to Ukraine. Russia's nuclear threats work, Ukraine and its staunchest allies have had to fight tooth and nail just to convince the US and others to give long range missiles, F-16ss. Meanwhile, Russia's getting away with war crimes and deliberately slaughtering civilians. So I want you to pay close attention to that opening clip.

Andrea Chalupa (00:08:04):

Trump very deliberately amplifies Russia's nuclear war threats against us. He is a traitor. And I want to remind everyone, NSA whistleblower Reality Winner, who was trying to fight back against the Left that was laughing at us about pointing out the reality that Russia helped Trump come to power, that Russia did hack our election systems in 2016. And yes, that mattered. Yes, that made a difference. It made a difference in terms of the fact that they were on every single social media platform. They were dividing and conquering, right? They were Black Lives Matter sock puppets astroturfing, all of it. And so Reality Winner risked her life and career to stick her neck out. And she thought she could trust some journalist

with this very sensitive intel confirming that Russia had hacked our election systems. And instead, those journalists were sloppy. They undermined her and she ended up in prison.

Andrea Chalupa (00:09:04):

I want to point out that Reality Winner was treated harsher than Trump with his 91 criminal indictments. This man is a walking talking weapon of the Kremlin. His terrifying sound bites aren't just sound bites. They control legislation in the House. His proxy, Mike Johnson, is deliberately denying aid for Ukraine when the clock is ticking. This is very dangerous because we're headed into the hell of winter and winters are very harsh in that part of the world. And so obviously Russia's going to think, "Okay, Ukraine's been abandoned. That's going to demoralize my enemy. Now is the time to strike. They're not getting all the aid they need. They're going to run out of ammo," and so on. That's what Putin is headed towards. And meanwhile, we're all distracted by Putin's buddy, Netanyahu, carrying out a massive genocide. It is a genocide, and I'm telling you this, as an expert in genocide, as somebody that has made two films and spoken to universities across North America and Europe and the Middle East on genocide and how they operate, how they start.

Andrea Chalupa (00:10:04):

So what Netanyahu's genocidal coalition of Stephen Millers is carrying out against the Palestinians is something that is deserving of the world's alarm, is deserving of ceasefire now. Please call your representatives, demand a ceasefire now. If you love Israel, if you want to push back against Netanyahu who's an existential threat to Israel and is trying to dismantle democracy within Israel and needs a forever war to stay in power, call your representatives and demand a ceasefire now. This isn't about letting Hamas, the terrorist group, get away with its own mass murder and genocidal aims. It's about ending the deliberate slaughter of civilians, including hospitals. It doesn't fucking matter if, let's say, Hamas is there. Let's say Hamas has a whole war room underneath the hospital. Have you not seen that Christmas movie *Die Hard* where Bruce Willis is in a hostage situation? They know it's a hostage situation.

Andrea Chalupa (00:10:59):

Do they bomb Nakatomi Plaza? No. They let the special ops do their thing. Again, I'm not going to repeat every episode we've done, just look at the show notes. So let's move on. We'll cover more of Netanyahu and what's going on in this horrific must-end-now, ceasefire now war in this week's bonus show. You can comment on that when it's coming up this weekend. But let's move back on to this. And again, just call your reps. Ceasefire now. It's in everyone's best interest. Also, to fact-check this claim that the Russians want to nuke us. First of all, their nukes are shit. They've run all sorts of exercises on their nuclear program and it's just as limp as Putin, okay? All the Russians, they hide the whole apparatus that has put Russians—the people—into a prison of corruption. All of those oligarchs and their minigarchs, their children, they hide their money in Western capitals around the world, especially New York, especially Florida.

Andrea Chalupa (00:11:59):

They send their kids to private schools, to live in luxury apartments owned by shell companies in the West. The Russians are never going to nuke their kids, their offshore bank accounts, their mistresses they keep in Paris and London. Once again, Russian corruption is the best ally we have. The Russians have Trump, but we have Russian corruption to weaken our enemy from within. So don't believe they're nuclear threats, whether they're coming from Putin or his asset, Trump. And I want to take a moment, speaking of all these themes, to announce a special unofficial Gaslit Nation Night Out. I will be joining the audience of a special talk this Thursday that is November 16th at NYU at 5:00 PM Eastern where

Terrell Starr of the *Black Diplomats* Podcast will be speaking. If you can attend that event with me, I'll be in the audience. I hope to say hi to Terrell on my way out.

Andrea Chalupa (00:12:55):

Maybe we'll run into each other there. Look for information in the show notes. And another fun announcement I want to share is that the wonderful Jennifer Taub, author of *Big Dirty Money: The Shocking Injustice and Unseen Cost of White-collar Crime*, and host of the podcast *Booked Up*, had me on her show. Here's an excerpt of our discussion.

[begin audio clip]

Andrea Chalupa:

*Bloodlands* is what my grandparents survived, what my uncle witnessed as a teenager. My uncle spent nine months or so in a psych ward because of all the trauma that he endured from seeing headless soldiers dancing, their bodies still moving.

Jen Taub:

Oh, geez.

Andrea Chalupa:

And in this refugee camp where my mother was born—

Jen Taun:

In Ukraine?

Andrea Chalupa:

This was in Germany. So, the defeated powers of World War II became holding pens for the tens of millions of displaced people while the allies could figure out what to do with them. And in this refugee camp—it was, in the American zone under the Americans—my grandfather took it upon himself to organize and produce the artists in the refugee camp, the artists. And through them, they put on Shakespeare in Ukrainian.

Jen Taub:

I love it.

Andrea Chalupa:

They put on Shakespeare. You know what I'm saying? So they have survived hell on earth.

[end clip]

Andrea Chalupa:

I want to build on this because art therapy is real therapy. If you're like me, if you came from a tough family, an immigrant background, my parents were born in refugee camps. Their families came to the US with nothing. My grandmothers worked as hotel maid. They fought for everything they have. So this whole idea of seeing a therapist, paying someone to listen to you, talk about yourself and your problems, I always—forgive me for sharing this—but I always assumed that was something that rich kids did in Manhattan because their parents were too busy to spend time with them and to really have a meaningful relationship with them. And I always thought, “Well, at least my parents have time for me and therapy is for rich kids.”

Andrea Chalupa (00:14:53):

And it wasn't until I became a statistic, I was one of many sexual assault survivors, and I tried to bury that down and just walk it off. And it ended up rearing its ugly head in my life in all sorts of ways, forcing me finally into therapy to save my life. And that was when I understood that, no, therapy, mental health is real health. You go to a dentist for a cavity. You break your arm, you go to the hospital. Therapy is an extension of that. It's real medical attention. Part of that, what I found through my own journey with that is how much art is my therapy, how much making art sustains me. So for instance, you've heard a lot of sobbing episodes of *Gaslit Nation* recently. This has also been during this time of bearing witness to this genocide carried out, this war with Israel and Hamas, and obviously the threats right now here in the US, the far-right threats against Ukraine. It's been a really demoralizing time.

Andrea Chalupa (00:15:50):

And one might—excuse me if I want to just to step away from the show for a couple of weeks because I can't do this anymore, but I stayed doing it. And one of the ways that allowed me to show up for myself and my community and be strong for myself and be strong for my community was making art. This has been a really productive time for me in making art. I've been able to put on my oxygen mask and breathe deep and go into other dimensions and have conversations with my higher mind, and go places I needed to go. Art is real power. Art is survival. One of the great thinkers we're all relying on today to get through these times, Audre Lorde, she's famous of course for saying, “Your silence will not protect you.” She was a great artist. She used poetry to humanize, to fight against the machine.

Andrea Chalupa (00:16:38):

She was not only Black, a woman, but a lesbian. And so she was fighting on so many fronts and she fought back through the power of art. So we need art. And we've had on the show a hero of mine, Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian filmmaker who was on the rise across Europe. He was arrested for his support of the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine, which at its heart began as a big old art festival to push back against corruption. And Oleg Sentsov had this big career. He was going to international film festivals. He had a project set up with a UK producer. He had so much going for him and the Russians nabbed him and sent him off to Siberia, putting him in a prison there to die. What did he do in prison? He wrote stories. He wrote a novel. He directed a film from prison that was eventually made on his release.

Andrea Chalupa (00:17:26):

He left a whole body of work during his time in a Siberian prison, and now he is a soldier fighting in the front. He married a wonderful woman who's on the front lines of fighting against corruption in Ukraine. They had a child together. And Oleg is someone who might not survive this war, like so many Ukrainians who are giving their for their country to fight for us in this global war of democracy against fascism. But he's left us this body of work, even produced under extreme circumstances. And that is how you know that art is a real power. Art is survival. It is not something for the privileged. It is not something for the wealthy. It is for you. The war is in the mind. They want to demoralize us. They want us to hide visibility.

Putting yourself out there, that is something Tim Snyder, the historian who's written so many extraordinary books including, *On Tyranny*, concrete steps we can take to fight against fascism.

Andrea Chalupa (00:18:28):

Tim's an old friend of mine. He was the historical advisor, one of many, on my film, *Mr. Jones*. Tim says very clearly in his book, "Don't hide. Visibility matters. Put yourself out there." And a way to do that creatively, meaningfully is to make art. And art also shows us ways to go into different realms of thinking and to imagine a new world is possible; new possibilities. That is why the artists, the independent thinkers, the journalists, they're always killed first. They're always rounded up and killed first. The history of authoritarianism, the history of dictatorship, the intelligentsia, they're rounded up and killed first. Ukraine's Holodomor, Russia's genocide famine in Ukraine, how do you think that started? There was a disinformation campaign, a propaganda campaign, and the intellectuals were rounded up, killed, put under such extreme pressures that they were forced into dying by suicide.

Andrea Chalupa (00:19:19):

They always target the artists first for that reason because we need the artists more now than ever. And every single one of us, since we were a child with our creative, wondrous way of seeing the world, is a natural born artist. I was not born knowing how to write screenplays. I was not born knowing how to write and talk to countless strangers through a microphone. These were things that I had to embrace that were already there inside of me and I had to figure it out as I went along through life. And so I want to just share with you all, you are an artist. Every single one of us is an artist. Every single one of us has a voice that matters and that is desperately needed now. And so what I'm going to do is I'm putting together all that I've learned the hard way into a concise workshop that I'm going to share as a thank you to our Patreon community that keeps this show going.

Andrea Chalupa (00:20:13):

And it's going to put everything in there that has helped me understand that I'm an artist and how to use that power not only to sustain myself and my work, but to fight for those who desperately need me to use my voice, use my power, use whatever I have to keep fighting, to push back. I have learned a lot of this from watching very closely friends, journalists, artists, activists on the ground in Ukraine. One of my closest mentors all these years has been Nelson George, who we've had on the show, he was a writer of the hip hop movement here in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. He came up with Spike Lee. He invested in Spike Lee's first film, which launched the independent film industry in America. I've seen, I've witnessed, I've collected so many stories that have shaped me as a person in how essential art is in pushing back against the machinery that is trying to dehumanize us, destroy us, silence us.

Andrea Chalupa (00:21:13):

If you hide, the machine wins. And by making art, by turning inward, by finding your own oxygen mask in this world, you are unleashing your power. You're getting your voice out there, and that is strengthening your voice to use it for those who desperately need it around the world. And it's such a wonderful thing. And if you've ever benefited from anything I've ever done on this show, ever, or anything I've ever done with my films and so on, understand that my fuel, my engine comes from understanding myself as an artist and making art and showing up for myself that way. And everything I'm going to go through in this workshop is going to help you do that. This year was very intense with a lot of people reaching out to me for mentorship. I don't know what happened in 2023, maybe a bunch of people finally were working on projects during all these pandemic years and they were ready to take it out this year. But I got a bunch of requests for information on how I did my things. And so I was really shocked by the information I was sharing with others and how basic it was in my view. And it made me realize that I shouldn't take for

granted what I know and what I've had to learn the hard way. So I'm going to put it in a package and send it to you—

[Hello Fresh advertisement]

Andrea Chalupa (00:23:33):

—just listen to it whether you consider yourself an artist or not. And I think it's something that we all need to fortify ourselves with, especially going into 2024 because we need to fight like hell in the short term and we need to think in the long term and build in the long term for the sustainable world we want to live in. And that brings us to the special guests we have on this show. Please watch this film we're about to discuss, speaking of art. It's a beautifully done film on an urgent human rights crisis in America, the immigration crisis, which holds up a mirror, the ruling establishment of both parties; Republicans and Democrats. So please welcome to the show Lisa Molomot and Jeff Bemiss, co-directors/producers of the Peabody Award-winning documentary *Missing in Brooks County*. Look for a link in the show notes on how to watch this must-see film.

Andrea Chalupa (00:24:23):

It explains so much about the power structures driving not just our domestic policy, but also our foreign policy. Entrenched US border policy is deliberately engineered to be cruel. This interview provides solutions and ways for us to confront that for the sake of everybody. How can we all trust a government that has no problem dehumanizing others, whether they're US citizens or not? We can't, right? So it's the refugees fleeing across the border today, it's the Palestinians trapped in Gaza today, it'll be us if we don't stop this, especially in the age of AI, where the billionaires think they're going to hide from us in their bunkers because they're delusional. We're up against mass murdering delusional oligarchs that have no problem with normalizing mass death and allowing their buddies that they're ideologically aligned with—like Putin and Netanyahu—to get away with mass murder, to normalize mass murder.

Andrea Chalupa (00:25:17):

So it's very, very, very, very, very important for us to say, “No, we refuse to normalize this. We refuse to accept this. We are going to join together, stay together, to imagine that a different future is possible.” So please listen to this interview and watch the film after and join me at the workshop I'll be posting next week. It's a podcast that you can download, listen to on your own time, take notes. I'll have some prompts included in this and that'll be my thank you gift to share my gratitude with our Patreon community that allows our team to stay together and keep making this show and fight for a sustainable, livable future for us and the generations ahead. Remember, we're building a ladder out of this black hole of corruption one rung at a time, and we're going to do that together.

[*Missing in Brooks County* trailer]

Andrea Chalupa (00:27:15):

I want to start off by asking, is there really a Texas state allegiance pledge that's done in Texas? Because that came off as very secessionist.

Lisa Molomot (00:27:25):

Well, I don't think it's everywhere in Texas because I have a friend from Dallas who told me she doesn't remember doing that growing up, but it certainly exists in South Texas.

Jeff Bemiss (00:27:37):

The Texas pledge, yes.

Andrea Chalupa (00:27:38):

One state under God, forget the rest, it's just Texas. Yeah, that came off as very secessionist. And there's been of course Kremlin-backed secessionist movements coming out of Texas. And you know what they would love to do, but they need our so-called Blue state tax money to survive and deal with a lot of their own state-caused problems like the blackouts, rolling blackouts and so on. So walk us through Brooks County, Texas. How did this crisis happen and what can be done to stop this death trap there?

Jeff Bemiss (00:28:15):

Well, the problem is that in 1994, the Clinton administration started a policy they called Prevention Through Deterrence, and it has had all kinds of unintended consequences, including causing a significant number of deaths of migrants as you see in the film. And the main reason is that they've militarized the border under this policy. And in particular, there are these interior immigration checkpoints. And I think a lot of people, certainly myself included before we made this film, I had no idea that we have such a thing as a checkpoint that is not at the border, but there are over a hundred of them. They're all over the United States. Two thirds of the US population live inside a checkpoint zone because they extend not only from international boundaries but from coastal boundaries. So my entire home state of Connecticut is inside these checkpoint zones. And when they put these checkpoints there, it forces traffic to go around them into deliberately chosen hostile terrain where people succumb to all kinds of things; heat strokes, snake bite, dehydration, etc.

Lisa Molomot (00:29:25):

These ranches that migrants are walking on for days are enormous. One of them is almost the size of Rhode Island. I mean, it's crazy. So that kind of land is really valued in Texas and these ranches are where these migrants are crossing through and there's no clean water. A lot of migrants come in the summer months because it's not hunting season, so they avoid the hunting season because that's more dangerous I guess. But the heat in South Texas, and of course with climate change, it's just getting worse, so when we began filming this film in 2015, we could not have imagined the situation getting worse. But in fact, even since we finished editing the film in 2019/2020, the situation's gotten even worse because the summers have been just so hot. And then also the issue is spreading beyond just Brooks County into West Texas now, and it's a whole new situation for them.

Lisa Molomot (00:30:44):

And so now Brooks County is having to educate other parts of Texas about how to handle this crisis. There's not a whole lot of federal money that's supporting this crisis. And that's the situation we're presenting in *Missing in Brooks County* is this world that doesn't feel like America in a way because you've got these volunteers who are cleaning up the mess of these policies that have been around for decades. And you've got someone at the South Texas Human Rights Center, which is just this little building in the middle of nowhere, and someone taking all the calls from families and trying to figure out how to deal with this situation where people are desperately trying to find their loved ones. But there's no centralized system that is dealing with this crisis. So if there was a centralized system where the people who are taking the DNA from the remains and the people who are communicating with the families, if they could get together and talk, they could make identifications.

Lisa Molomot (00:31:56):



But there's not a system like we have here—I live in Tucson, and in Pima County here, there is such a system. So there is a model of such a system, but the government needs to pay for that in order for that to happen. And they're not. So far, they haven't done that for Texas. There's the crisis, there's what is happening and people are dying. And then on top of that, there's what happens when these remains are found and sometimes just buried without the DNA taken, which is illegal, but these counties don't have money to pay for that whole process. So they're burying unidentified remains illegally.

Andrea Chalupa (00:32:39):

I tell our listeners all the time to make phone calls to get out the vote. We have a big election coming up and we've made well over a hundred thousand phone calls for all of these key races like in Georgia and the Senate race in Pennsylvania and so on. And one of the reasons I give out of the very long list of reasons is you'll be learning things about your country that you did not know about by talking to voters just like you in a totally different part of the country. So in your film, you show this dystopian checkpoint that exists well within the borders of Texas—not on the border, well within the border of Texas—a militarized checkpoint that is hunting down migrants and questioning American citizens and stopping them, questioning them as they're trying to just be on their way driving across a very big state.

Andrea Chalupa (00:33:26):

I knew these dystopian militarized checkpoints already existed from talking to a voter in Arizona during the last midterms. He was telling me, “You would not believe how militarized things have gotten and it's just right near my home now you have one of these checkpoints.” And so I'm telling you, *Gaslit Nation* listeners, make these phone calls. You're going to learn things about your country you didn't realize were happening. And your film is most definitely one of the top documentaries for people to watch, especially going into the 2024 election, because it shows all the different forces. When Fox News, when Mayor Eric Adams where I live in New York City, when they're going on and on spreading this fear factor about the crisis at the border, they're talking about very specifically your film. You show the humanity of this border crisis, the people caught in the middle. Could you talk a little bit about those heroes?

Andrea Chalupa (00:34:20):

They've kept their sense of humor. You see them really struggling to keep their spirit up. You see that young couple putting up signs for a lost loved one, and they have that buoyant little girl who's just skipping along with them trying to find her uncle, just showing the resiliency of raising children during such a really awful time that the parents are trying to endure. It's such an extraordinary, wonderful array of humanity that you share in your film. So could you talk about those individuals caught in the middle and how they're trying to deal with this?

Jeff Bemiss (00:34:53):

I think you put your finger right on it. We often say, Lisa and I, that we made the film because we felt that if people could meet the families of the missing, that they would feel differently about the way we're administering our border, especially lawmakers would feel differently about the laws that they're passing about our borders. And also, I want to qualify how I started out, I said that prevention through deterrence had unintended consequences. The complicated reality is it was intended to cause these deaths and it was known, but what they thought would happen was it would send a message of deterrence that would be heated and these deaths would stop and it would act as a natural barrier, this uninhabitable, inhospitable terrain. But it didn't happen. They've never achieved an acceptable level of deterrence and people are just dying. In the film, we put 20,000 as the number. We're being very conservative.

Jeff Bemiss (00:35:52):

I mean, there's some groups who are estimating as many as 80,000 since 1994, since this policy started, because most are never found. And that's I think one thing that we learned doing this film is it's one thing when you lose a family member and they die and there's a funeral and a ceremony and there's a moment where you can at least try to process what's happened, pick up the pieces and perhaps move on. But the real tragedy of the missing is that there's never that moment. The people don't die, they just never come home. You're in this endless grief, this limbo of pain and suffering. I really think it's one of the worst things that can happen to a person is to have a missing family member.

Andrea Chalupa (00:36:43):

God. We talk a lot about Ukraine on the show. I have family friends in Ukraine. And a lot of the things that they were saying [in your documentary], it's what Ukrainians are saying: "I don't know how I can carry on. How am I allowed to laugh? How am I allowed to live my life right now knowing that my brother's out there? We don't know where his body is?" And it's just the saying where our lives go on. But we have this hole in our hearts. And I think when people think about the migrant crisis, what these people are living with, it's what so many of us are living with. It's us. It's our families down there that are struggling with this, trying to find their family. It's us. It's like we all sort of feel it. We have a hole in our heart from people we've lost from the pandemic, people we're afraid of losing because of long covid and so on. So many people right now and around the world are living with that exact same hole in their heart of grief and searching and wanting answers and closure. And so when people think about what is this migrant crisis, what is this border crisis? It's the same hole that's in your heart. That's what it is. And your film captures that so beautifully.

Lisa Molomot (00:37:47):

Then there's also Eddie and Kate. So Eddie Canales runs the South Texas Human Rights Center. He came out of retirement to do this. It's completely funded by donations. And so that's not easy. Every day he's getting calls all day long on his cell phone from families. And then Kate Spradley at Texas State University is working with other colleagues and students to do what they can to make this better. But the fact is that this is really a crisis. It's a mass disaster, as Kate calls it. And the thing that's different about this mass disaster is that it's very quiet and it's invisible. It's on private ranch land. Every August we hear about it again in the *New York Times* or some big paper because there are so many deaths in the summer and there's usually an article in one of the major papers about it, and then it gets quiet again and a year goes by and then they talk about how "this is the worst year on record for migrant deaths."

Lisa Molomot (00:38:57):

And then another year goes by. It's unbelievable. Jeff and I can predict what's going to happen because we've been working on this since 2015. So we've seen it evolve and we see the patterns. And I also think that Americans just don't know. We didn't know. I mean, I knew about migrant deaths, for sure. I live in Arizona. But we had never heard of Brooks County when we first went there. And when we got there, we thought we were going to the border. We were brought down to Brooks County by another forensic scientist who we had reached out to about possibly doing a film about her. And she brought us to Brooks County and we're like, okay, can we see the border? And she said, we're nowhere near the border. We're 70 miles north of the border. And we were shocked. You know, what is going on here?

Lisa Molomot (00:39:47):

And it took us a while to really figure out what's happening here. We went to the cemetery and were like, "What? They're finding remains and they're burying them" and then there's a little plaque and then the gardeners run over the plaques. And so then we don't know, we have no sense of who's buried or if there's someone buried in the ground. And it didn't feel like America. It felt really surreal the first time

we went there. We were just trying to absorb it all and process it. And then we went home and were like, “Okay, we thought we were making a film about a forensic scientist. This is much more than a film about a forensic scientist. This is crazy what's going on here.”

Andrea Chalupa (00:40:26):

It's straight up dystopian; unmarked graves. So if you could talk a bit about the Trump years, because that must've been hell for you. If you started this documentary in 2015 and then the shock and awe of the Trump election and all of the changes that Stephen Miller and Bannon quickly put into effect creating this... Worsening an already inhumane crisis at the border, what was that like for you in covering that story during that time?

Lisa Molomot (00:40:57):

I mean, in some ways, yes, there was more law enforcement in Brooks County. That's the first thing we noticed after Trump was elected and we went down there on our first trip after the election. For sure, there was more border patrol around the checkpoint, around Falfurrias. But to be honest, it didn't feel that different. People were still dying. This is something that's been going on for decades and there have been plenty of Democrats in office who have allowed this to happen. So in some ways it was different with the more militarization, but in other ways it felt like business as usual, like this is continuing to happen.

Jeff Bemiss (00:41:40):

Immigration is one of these issues that when you look back at things that have been passed and actions that have been taken, it kind of changes your notion of traditional left and right politics, I think. You know, Reagan actually gave amnesty. His enforcement never really got funded and executed. Bill Clinton is responsible probably—his administration—more than any other for these deaths. And believe it or not, the only president to ever sign a bill that took any responsibility for these deaths on behalf of the US government was Donald Trump. So here's the thinking: If it's a bipartisan problem, maybe there could be a bipartisan solution. Maybe this is something that... Because Eddie Canales in the film, he likes to say that in his opinion, the answer to this is to regularize migration. Just let people come through safe ports of entry, do background checks, keep track of people, let them have work status.

Jeff Bemiss (00:42:38):

The last jobs report, there's almost 9 million open jobs still. And maybe let them even post a bond at the border, take that money that they were giving to the smuggler that was ending up in the cartel's pockets and post it as a bond at the border and make the smuggler's services worthless because the cartels—these transnational criminal organizations—from what we understand, they're making almost as much money smuggling people as drugs right now. So it would certainly curtail their revenue, which would add to the security of the United States. There's a lot of wins here. It would make the border patrol's job between ports of entry where they're chasing people and so forth in the brush, it would make it a little easier because you would reduce the migrant traffic, which is not really the people that they need to catch. The people they really want to catch are the drug smugglers and the gang members, the cartel members, et cetera. So I don't know, there's certain political obstacles, but it's not something that any administration has latched onto. And frankly, the people we talk to who are working in this area, the NGOs and volunteers acting, they're not happy with the Biden administration, really, either. I mean, the Trump administration took things to new heights in terms of the meanness and the cruelty in separating families. But the Biden administration really has not yet moved this situation forward in a positive direction.

Lisa Molomot (00:44:02):

The act that Jeff referred to was the Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act. And that was a piece of legislation that Donald Trump signed in December, 2020, right before he left office. And what that does is simply give NGOs like Kate Spradley, the forensic scientist or Eddie Canales of the South Texas Human Rights Center funding for dealing with the crisis, some funding. And it's the first time in all of these decades that our federal government has acknowledged... To me, the signing of a piece of legislation like this is an acknowledgement that this is coming from policy from the federal government, which is why they're giving some funding to deal with the crisis, but it's just a bandaid really.

Andrea Chalupa (00:44:58):

So all the solutions, Jeff, that you outlined make perfect sense. We've got jobs that need to be filled. The US government could actually make money off of people wanting to come here. Lives will be saved, families will be united. Families can live in peace if everything you said makes perfect sense and it's so pragmatic. The problem is that the federal policy and the state policy in states like Texas, as you all know, as our listeners know, it's being dictated by what's known as White Replacement Theory or hashtag white genocide as they like to say. And so it all comes down to the fact that these are Brown migrants. Of course, many people from other parts of the world, like even Ukrainian refugees, Russian refugees do try to go across the Mexican border, but it's primarily non-white migrants that are coming across the southern border. And that is really... It's the racism, it's the white supremacy, it's the brutality.

Andrea Chalupa (00:45:55):

It's like a Nazi neo confederate dystopian fascism that's really driving this nonsensical, brutal mass murdering policy at the border. And that's the fascists setting off an alarm because they know we're all talking. How do you combat that? Because you see the Fox News rancher, and I loved how you brilliantly showed him talking about trying to make a claim of what a compassionate person he is, and as he's trying to argue his case to be allowed into heaven, you're showing his walls covered—every single inch—with the heads of dead animals that he's killed and stuffed. And you're like, oh my God, you're Eric Cartman's uncle from South Park. And so you did a brilliant job in just letting us be an investigative journalist, meeting these different people on different sides of the issue, just struggling with different forces and collecting all of the information through your camera lens.

Andrea Chalupa (00:46:56):

And so I want to ask, what do you think Biden should do now, now that he's got one year left, maybe God willing, we will have a Democrat and not one of these Republicans... I know you said that it blows apart left/right politics, but you know Trump, if he gets in it's game over for everybody. But, so what would you want the Biden administration to do? What would you want the Democrats that came to power in Arizona to do? You mentioned some in that checklist, but what could they do right now to rally a new way of looking at this to sort of beat back the white supremacy? It doesn't have to be inevitable. We can chip away at that.

Lisa Molomot (00:47:35):

Well, I just want to say when we were filming in Texas, something that we couldn't get away from was the fact that everywhere we went, roads were being constructed. There's so much need for labor there; restaurant owners needing staff. I think everyone has their eye on the economy, always; every president, every lawmaker, every citizen. So I think—and Jeff definitely talked about this already—but it's like if we look at this from that point of view, because people respond to that. But it's also true. I mean, it's also very, very true. And when we were down in Texas before the election, right before the election, the same guy, Mike Vickers, when we asked him about the election, he was really concerned because he was

concerned about Hillary Clinton being elected because he was concerned about all of the border patrol jobs that would be lost if she took office.

Lisa Molomot (00:48:40):

That was his thinking. It was about jobs. And it was about high paying jobs because a border patrol job is a very good job in that area. It's an area that struggles economically. And so people grow up—it's true here in Arizona actually, where I live—people grow up and they think, what do I want to do when I grow up? Well, I want to have a good job. I want to become a border patrol agent. That is the way they think because that is the reality. So creating a different kind of job that deals with this crisis that's not *that kind* of job, but is more of maybe an administrative job, which is keeping track of people coming, you know, that seems like a decent humane solution.

Jeff Bemiss (00:49:31):

They've been hiring Rambo and GI Joe to patrol the border, and people say, “Well, really what they need to be hiring are managers who can run a system” because that's what most of the work is now, shepherding families through the system.

Andrea Chalupa (00:49:46):

Yeah, the system's dysfunctional like you said, but you have a bunch of cowboys that want to play cowboy.

Jeff Bemiss (00:49:52):

Yeah, it's a silly policy. I mean, it's a dangerous and devastating policy, but it's also ridiculous in many ways, this catch me if you can zone. In the film, the border patrol agents that we follow are actually part of a special division called Border Star. That's the search and rescue division. So basically they're trying to save what migrants they can who are in mortal jeopardy from the border patrol zone tactics. So instead of changing their tactics, they've formed another division to try to save the people their tactics are putting in jeopardy. It's like a policy in conflict with itself where the right hand strikes and the left hand saves, and really they need to rethink everything. They need to step back and look at prevention through deterrence. They need to look at these interior checkpoints and they need to look at the job situation and the labor situation in the United States. The labor is needed. And in fact, the border patrol, the head of the border patrol at the end of the Obama administration was starting to talk about prevention through deterrence. He wasn't making any big promises or commitments, but he was starting to say things like, “Okay, we're going to look at these interior checkpoints and we're going to decide if this depth in defense is really the best strategy or not.” That was really extraordinary, but then administrations change and priorities change over time.

Lisa Molomot (00:51:15):

We have shown the film to a group of board patrol, a group of leaders in Homeland Security. So there are people willing to think about this. I mean, nothing has happened yet, but I mean, I can't help but think that there is a possibility since they were willing to watch the film and discuss it with us, because ultimately no one wants people to die. That is for sure. I really fully believe that after working on this and sharing it with so many audiences, different kinds of audiences. We did a Texas tour with the film and it wasn't like we were showing it in Brooklyn. We were showing it in various parts of Texas. And it really, we got some audience members during the Q&A to say, “Hey, this is really making me rethink some things.” And that was really powerful for us, that at least it's the beginning of thinking, I mean, really, I feel like one of the ultimate goals of this film is to change the conversation, change the way we talk about

migration and talk about in a way where we understand we're talking about human beings. And so we have definitely seen little hints of possibility in the distribution of this film.

Andrea Chalupa (00:52:46):

It's a cultural change that's needed. And I think back on how they tried to make Kamala Harris the border czar and send her down there and send her down into those countries and say, "Do not come." And unfortunately a woman, especially a Black woman in that position, if she tries to take us in this direction, this pragmatic direction, she's going to be seen as weak, a woman, a Democrat weak on crime. "Look, they're not ready to lead. They're so emotional and empathic, get her out of there." But really this is just the common sense solution. The government will make money by putting up that financial bounty, you'll save money on resources having to go out and hunt for people you've killed through your brutal policies and so on. So hopefully Kamala Harris watches your film and makes a legacy for herself, a meaningful and brave one, and gives that all another shot. How high up have you been able to go in the Biden administration with this film?

Jeff Bemiss (00:53:43):

We've taken a couple trips to Washington, DC. The last one, Eddie Canales and Kate Spradley from the film came and we had some briefings and some presentations, some meetings and a big screening in the evening. It's hard to know how far you're getting. I'm not sure that we've made a huge inroads with the Biden administration or the executive. But Eddie and Kate had some good meetings with some representatives, House representatives and their staff from Texas. And there were some new ideas in the meetings. Whether there will be follow-up and whether there will be a political will, I can't say. I think Lisa kind of mentioned earlier that one of the problems with this is it's such a quiet disaster that it doesn't create the urgency that you might need to create the political will. For example, if this were a genocide, if this were some kind of military conflict or maybe planes were crashing in South Texas and a thousand people a year were dying, we couldn't ignore this. But in this case, people walk into the desert sometimes and they just vanish. And they don't have political clout, and sometimes the families don't have a voice or political clout, and so it's very, very hard to get someone to change a big policy to prevent it.

Lisa Molomot (00:55:04):

And I think, also, people don't want to hear about it. I remember talking with Robin Reineke who started the Colibri Center for Human Rights here in Tucson, and she was for a long time—is no longer—but she was sort of the Eddie Canales of Arizona. And so she was communicating with families from all over Central America, in Mexico. And she told me once that whenever she tells people what she does, it gets really quiet. And I think people just don't want to know that this is happening in their country. Those that do know or hear about it, it's just like... I don't know. It's too difficult to think about that, that we live in a country that is okay with this, for decades has been okay that this has been happening. I think it's really difficult for people to hear about this. And probably to watch our film. And we have heard from many people that it does stay with them and it's haunting. It was haunting for us to see it ourselves, to be honest.

Jeff Bemiss (00:56:15):

I'm sure the listeners to this podcast would like to know what they can do and they can call their lawmakers, they can watch the film and they can share the film. They can call lawmakers and say, "I've become aware of this problem and I don't want people to die." I mean, it's that simple. You don't have to

even know more than that. You can just say, "I don't want people to die for what's essentially a crime of trespassing." That would be a start.

Andrea Chalupa (00:56:39):

But you really outlined some brilliant solutions that any smart rising star in either party could adopt and make our country some money and save lives and create some smart transparent systems and save the taxpayers money. And I think that just needs to be a bill. We just need to take this episode and turn it into legislation. I want to just highlight some of the reasons why people are choosing to take these risks. One of the stories in your film talks about how Mexico just feels like a mafia-captured state and that you really don't have a future there unless you want to be in with the mafia, and that compromise and the dangers there. Could you speak a little bit about some of the reasons why people are... What are they running from? What are they trying to leave?

Jeff Bemiss (00:57:28):

I think we should probably start using the word refugee. I mean, people that are coming across the southwest border certainly fit that definition. This phrase, "Coming for a better life" has been used for decades. And I just recently spoke with an immigration attorney and he said, "Yeah, that's what everybody says. But once you get to know them, you know that there's always a story behind that phrase." And these days, the story has gotten quite dire. People are not able to feed their families, they're not able to live safely. There's forced gang recruitment, all kinds of drug violence. We've heard stories that you can't even improve your house. Let's say you want to fix up your front porch. People might think you have money then and they might kidnap your family. And there's corruption in government and law enforcement in a lot of these places. And now we have on top of it all climate displacement. Safety and security in a lot of places in the world has deteriorated and is continuing to deteriorate. So it's not like people are coming for this better life; it's all about ambition and they want more. When they say, "I want a better life," these days, they mean, "I want to live." That's really... And a lot of people who are coming across the border have already lost someone in their family to violence.

Lisa Molomot (00:58:52):

Yeah, and as we know, it's very difficult to gain asylum in this country. So the people we're talking about coming through across the Rio Grande, up to Brooks County, onto these ranches, walking for days on these ranches, these are people who are claiming asylum. They are coming... I think their situations are very desperate and they feel like they're up for this scary journey. And many people make it, but many people do not. In the course of filming, we met these two guys from Honduras who were stopped by border patrol. I mean, they weren't stopped, they were basically sort of rescued by border patrol because they had given up. It was just such a harrowing ordeal going through these ranches. They ran out of water. It was scary. It's scary being on these ranches. We've been on these ranches. At night in particular it all looks the same. So when you get lost, it's scary. So these guys, both of them gave up. And so we talked to them and I was really surprised to hear that what their intentions were were to come back, to try again, because they don't have a choice. It was such a scary and awful ordeal, and yet these guys know that they have no other choice but to do it again and try again at some point.

Andrea Chalupa (01:00:22):

I have to say from your film, from these conversations, I was getting flashes of all of my research into the absurdity and evil of the Soviet regime with the unmarked mass graves and the paranoid dysfunctional systems and, of course, the Nazi ideology of this engineered cruelty and just the normalization of it. And

then this idea that what Orwell wrote in his letter to Ukrainian refugees about why more people in the West didn't understand what they were going through was in the West, totalitarianism, they don't understand it. They can't understand it. And just like what you said, I don't think American audiences fully understand why people would choose this hostile terrain versus why people are fleeing. It's hard for us to understand that it's not just the American dream. It's not just so they can come here and own a house with white picket fence and eat at Arby's or McDonald's. It's really, they're running from something. They're running from terror. And I think more Americans need to shake the normalization out of this issue and agitate for common sense change and not buy into the fear and the right wing talking points and the vilification. We can get past this cult of violence that's currently dominating and killing innocent people.

Jeff Bemiss (01:01:39):

Another thing Eddie tends to say when he talks about Regularizing migration is that he would like to see people have labor mobility so they can go back and forth. And he likes to add that while not a silver bullet for some of the deteriorating factors that are pushing people to come to the United States, it is bound to improve the situation if you allow people to have economic and labor mobility in that way.

Andrea Chalupa (01:02:06):

A trillion percent. Open the damn borders. Make us like the UK before Brexit. Just open the damn borders and let's just economically strengthen each other. And America will still continue to be whatever it needs to be. We just need to... yeah, I think they really think we're going to become this Hispanic country that's just Spanish speaking and they won't have a voice anymore, and we're going to have a taco truck on every corner. And I'm just like, I live near Sunset Park in Brooklyn. It's great. [laughs] It's a wonderful time.

Jeff Bemiss (01:02:37):

There was a time when the labor pool south of the US Mexico border was considered a strategic national asset of the United States.

Andrea Chalupa (01:02:46):

Exactly right. Yeah. So I want to thank you and I want to ask, because your storytelling is so powerful and we're living in a time where we're always saying on this show, be creative. In a time where our enemies and the powerful forces we're up against are being so destructive, be creative. Could you give us advice on storytelling because your storytelling carries so much power. So how do you approach your work in terms of storytelling and what could you pass on to our audience who are storytellers of many varieties.

Lisa Molomot (01:03:15):

I think as documentary filmmakers and not journalists, we are lucky to have the ability to not have a deadline basically. And so we kept going back to Brooks County again and again. I think we made 14 trips there over four years. And we really immersed ourselves in the community there and really built some strong connections and rapports with people there. And I think because we didn't force the stories, we sort of were there when they were happening, and I think observing and going in as people who want to tell a story but we didn't know what that story was exactly at the beginning, and we didn't actually even meet the Romans until probably a year and a half into filming. But I think not rushing it and really allowing ourselves to grasp what was happening and to build these relationships, and I think that's the key.



Lisa Molomot (01:04:23):

And then, of course, Jeff and I had many, many car rides in Texas. And Texas is an enormous state going from South Texas to Houston to Austin that we had a lot of really good conversations in the car between one place and another. And I think talking through things and generating ideas together as co-directors, I think, really helped with the storytelling because it wasn't just one person thinking about what is happening and what the story is, it was two. I think that those were two big advantages, having the luxury of going back many times and establishing relationships, but also having the time to talk about it and then go home and be away from it too, because it's so intense. This type of story. To have a little distance from it I think helped us a lot. And then we had a lot of luck. I mean, we had a lot of bad luck filming, like every documentary filmmaker. But we had a lot of good luck and people who were willing to help us. And also since making the film, well, I mean during the making of the film but after, two partners, Washington Office on Latin America, the Southern Border Communities Coalition, lots of people who are already working on these important issues have stepped up and helped us get the film in front of the right people and support the film a hundred percent. And we're so grateful to all the people who are working to try to make this better.

Jeff Bemiss (01:06:07):

I would just add, you know, collaborate. I think that's really important, to find collaborators to work with. One person has a down day or down week, the other person can sort of keep them going and vice versa. And it really works, I think, especially if you're on a longer project.

Andrea Chalupa (01:06:26):

Well, thank you both so much. And as I said, I consider your documentary up there with Ava DuVernay's *The 13th*. People should watch both of those films hand in hand to understand the authoritarian threat America is experiencing right now that built our nation and that we need to redo the culture. We need to impeach normalization, as we say, and build a new culture because another world is possible. And the climate crisis is just going to make this refugee crisis on our southern border infinitely worse. So we have to get ready for that now and act humanely now and build humane systems now.

Jeff Bemiss(01:07:05):

Absolutely. Thank you for the conversation.

Lisa Molomot (01:07:08):

Thank you so much for inviting us and allowing us to talk about the film. We can't get enough about talking about this after working on this and living this for so many years. We just want to tell everyone and anyone that this is happening and that it cannot continue.

Andrea Chalupa (01:07:32):

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth-teller level or higher. To help people in Maui rebuild after the fires, donate to the Maui Strong Fund at [hawaiicommunityfoundation.org](http://hawaiicommunityfoundation.org). That's [hawaiicommunityfoundation.org](http://hawaiicommunityfoundation.org). Since Matt Gaetz and the rest of the Kremlin Kaucus want to hurt Ukraine, Ukraine needs all the help it can get as Russia's genocide continues. Donate to Razom for Ukraine at [razomforukraine.org](http://razomforukraine.org). We encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan. Donate at [rescue.org](http://rescue.org). And if you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to The Orangutan Project at [theorangutanproject.org](http://theorangutanproject.org).

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