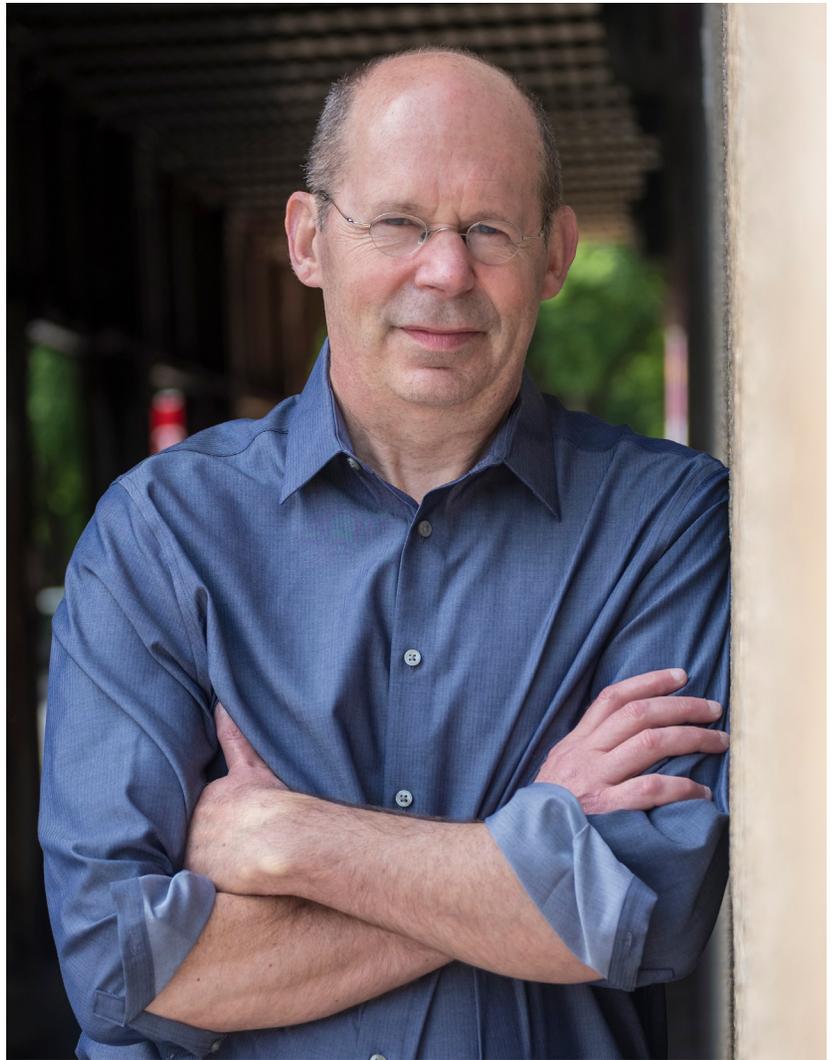


ALEX KOTLOWITZ WAS WORKING AS A *Wall Street Journal* writer in Chicago in the late '80s when he began researching a story about life in the projects. What he found besides living conditions rendered deplorable by government neglect was a society riven by violence. His *WSJ* stories based on that research led to a book, *There Are No Children Here*, that the New York Public Library called one of the 150 most important books of the 20th Century. It received the Helen B. Bernstein Award and was adapted as a television movie produced by and starring Oprah Winfrey.

In three subsequent books and countless magazines articles, Mr. Kotlowitz has continued exposing the horrors of inequality, injustice and racism in America. And he has continued winning accolades. His second book, *The Other Side of the River*, received *The Chicago Tribune's* Heartland Prize for Nonfiction and was selected by *The New York Times* as a Notable Book of the Year. His most recent book, *An American Summer: Love and Death in Chicago*, received the J. Anthony Lukas Book Prize. A professor at Northwestern University, Kotlowitz teaches courses on nonfiction storytelling, exploring the beauty and power of journalistic narrative. In the wake of the reckoning that followed the killing of George Floyd last year, the *Brunswick Review* interviewed Mr. Kotlowitz to ask, among other questions, whether these latest revelations of racism in America represent an inflection point.



Love and Death in Chicago

For journalists, is empathy in any way at odds with objectivity?

The notion of objectivity in journalism is hogwash, or at least a faint. It's not really what we're asking of ourselves. We're not blank slates. It's impossible to come to a moment without being influenced by our own personal and collective histories. What we're really asking of ourselves is that we be ready and willing to challenge our assumptions at every bend, to be knocked off balance. We're asking that we be honest to what we see and hear, that we be fair and that, of course, we be accurate. Empathy is not at all at odds with that. Empathy is the centripetal force of storytelling, trying to understand what pushes and pulls at someone. Empathy is very distinct from

A Visit with ALEX KOTLOWITZ. BY EMILY WANG

sympathy, which is about feeling sorry for someone, taking pity on them. Empathy requires this leap, this capacity to try to imagine yourself as someone else. We're not trying to justify or excuse someone's actions, but rather to understand them, both in the moment and in the context of their lives. It's not only central to storytelling, it's also central to community. It's what holds us together. It's what binds us.

You've become extremely close to some of your interview subjects. Should other journalists become as personally invested as you have in the stories they tell?

I end up spending months, sometimes years, with the people I'm writing about. I mean, we're human.

It's inevitable you build some kind of relationships with people. And some of those relationships are more complicated than others. For me, one of the perks of this work is that so many of the people I've written about have become a part of my life and my family's life. And I feel so much richer for it.

I think the challenge for me, is that, when I spend months if not years with people and get to know them and really care about them on a personal level, when I sit down to write I physically create some distance. I have to because I have to remind myself in the end that I'm not writing for them. I'm writing for my reader. I have to remind myself to be honest to what I've seen and what I've heard. I always tell my students that I'm usually writing about people because on some fundamental level I admire them, I admire who they are. I admire how they've navigated their life. I think that if I am honest about people, about all their complexities, all their flaws, that in the end, people will see what I've seen and will come away with the same admiration. But when I sit down and write, I kind of disappear on people. And I tell them. I apologize, but I do need that distance.

In your mind, do violent offenders and criminals deserve empathy?

There's one story in particular in my book, *An American Summer*, about Eddie Bocanegra, whom I consider a good friend and a remarkable human being. Eddie often feels defined by a moment when he was 18. In an act of revenge for a friend who had been shot, Eddie took the life of a rival gang member. Bryan Stevenson, who wrote *Just Mercy*, has this line, "We're all more than the worst thing we've ever done." I think Stevenson is absolutely right about that. Eddie is this wonderful father and husband, and now runs one of the most innovative violence prevention programs in the country. He's also an incredibly generous soul. I don't mean to excuse what people have done, but people have this incredible capacity to change, to shift their moral center.

I just taught a class through Medill [Northwestern University's Journalism school] at Stateville Prison, which is a maximum-security prison. And we had 10 Medill students. We'd go out there, carpool once a week and meet with 10 incarcerated students, all of whom were there for violent offenses. Many of them were there for murder. Most of them were in their forties and fifties and a couple of them in their sixties. And they were remarkable people. Deeply thoughtful and curious and kind. I never asked about their crimes. These are people who were pushing against being defined by that



In 1993, *There Are No Children Here* was adapted into a television film of the same name starring Oprah Winfrey.

singular moment. Each of them in their own way had found their way.

For me, empathy, which is so central to my work, is not about excusing someone, but trying to understand them. Trying to understand how they get to a certain place, why they make the choices they do, what's pushing and pulling at them. And that's certainly what I attempted to do in *An American Summer*.

As a professor, what do you hope your students will take away from your class?

I hope that they come away with a full admiration and respect for the process of writing. Writing is this really deliberate exercise. I've been at it for 40 years, and it's gotten easier in some ways. But, man, it is still really, really hard. And with my students, I read their work closely and mark it up with comments and suggestions. I think it can be intimidating and sometimes I think students feel I'm being cruel. So

now, at the beginning of my course, I take a *New Yorker* piece I submitted in which my editor wrote back saying, “I love this piece.” And then you look at it and it’s just dripping in blood. I mean, it’s all marked up in red. I give this to my students just to let them know that my close reading of their pieces is really an act of love.

You’ve been part of the fight for racial justice for a long time. Do you think 2020 and the Black Lives Matter movement represent an inflection point that will result in political and social change?

I hope it’s an inflection point. In the wake of the George Floyd murder, we’ve seen the emergence of a more robust Black Lives Matter movement, and people on both sides of the racial divide are asking questions about the legacy of structural racism. We’ve also come out of four years in which race was central to the rise of our former president. And it’s not even been a question of dog whistles. He was a president who openly trafficked in racist rhetoric. For me, one of the things that’s been really disheartening is that I feel very disconnected at the moment from parts of our country. Much of it having to do around race. So I think we’re at a place, at a kind of reckoning. Or at least I hope so. For the past few years, there hasn’t been any space to have the conversation around all the things that really matter. Maybe, hopefully, we’re slowly finding our way back, to a place at least where we can address some of the gross racial and economic inequities in this country.

We have such a long way to go. I just got an email the other day from one of the state schools in North Carolina, and learned they’re using my book, *The Other Side of the River*, which very specifically grapples with the question of race. It’s gratifying that they’re having students read the book. It came out 25 years ago. The sobering thing is how resonant it still feels today.

Can you ever envision the granting of financial reparations for Black Americans? How do we close the racial wealth gap?

I remember reading Ta-Nehisi Coates’ piece in *The Atlantic*, “The Case for Reparations.” I think before that piece, if you had asked me that question, I would’ve said, “Look, we need to move on.” But after reading that essay, for me, the question of reparations wasn’t so much a question of repairing the wrongs of slavery. I think Ta-Nehisi made this cogent argument in that piece about how we don’t have to

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EMILY WANG, a December graduate of Northwestern University, is an Executive in Brunswick’s New York office.

go back 100, 150 years to look at what we’ve done to the Black community in this country. He reports on the 1960s in Chicago, where he looks at how Blacks were kept from acquiring and owning property—the main source of how people build up capital. He makes a very strong argument that given everything we’ve done since slavery to keep Blacks from being equal participants in this economy and in this society, that we need to find ways to repair that. So I do think we need to think about some kind of reparations, some kind of way to level that playing field.

Do you see it as progress that there are so many prominent Black voices addressing these issues now?

To be clear, there have been prominent Black voices for a long time, writers like James Baldwin. But no question about it, there’s an emergence of profoundly provocative and popular Black writers today, from Ta-Nehisi to Nikole Hannah-Jones to Isabel Wilkerson, whose work is so critical to this moment. But in my profession, like so many, we have work to do. Journalism has not been great at hiring and promoting Black reporters and editors. We need more diverse voices in our newsrooms.

You’ve mentioned that writing about tragedy has caused you emotional distress. Why do you continue to do it?

I’m not an angry person, but in the end, I often write out of anger. I see things that feel unfair or unjust. It’s what propels me. And often I write about moments that are deeply unsettling. This last book was hard and it emotionally took its toll. And I suppose part of my challenge is to write about troubling episodes in people’s lives in a way that doesn’t define people by that one particular moment in their life, and to tell stories that surprise readers, that, again, challenges what they thought they knew and gets them thinking differently about their own place in the world.

What is next for you?

I have a book idea which I’m not quite ready to talk about. I’m actually not entirely sure I can pull it off. I’m often filled with this self-doubt, especially early on. One of the things that’s been really frustrating about this pandemic is I haven’t been able to meet with people face to face. But I just got my second vaccine shot, so I’m headed back out into the world, to do some reporting. Something keeps drawing me back to this particular story, and I need to figure out what that is. ♦