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National Book Award winner Jason De León uncovers stories at the U.S.-Mexico border

Stella Frances
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What happens when an anthropologist embeds for seven years with a group of smugglers moving migrants across Mexico?

If that anthropologist is UCLA professor Jason De León, the result is “Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling” (Penguin Random House, 2024), which won the 2024 National Book Award for Nonfiction. Rigorously researched and deeply felt, De León’s work illuminates the high stakes and complex forces driving one of the world’s most volatile and valuable black markets — the exchange of money for migration.

De León will discuss his book Thursday, May 15, at 7:30 p.m. in UC Santa Barbara’s Campbell Hall, as part of UCSB Arts & Lectures’ Justice for All initiative. His talk, “Uncovering Stories at the U.S.-Mexico Border,” is followed by a Q&A moderated by UCSB Professor D. Inés Casillas and a book signing. Admission is free for UCSB students with a current ID, and $20 for the general public. Arts & Lectures will

distribute copies of “Soldiers and Kings,” one book per household, while supplies last.

As immigration dominates national headlines, and the stakes of deportation continue to escalate, De León brings first-hand knowledge to the discussion of immigration within communities. The event highlights the mission of the A&L Justice for All initiative, that learning and growth can come from confronting “uncomfortable questions and difficult problems,” while “guiding us all toward a more equitable world.”

Presented in association with UCSB Departments of Anthropology, Chicana and Chicano Studies and Sociology, the event comes out of the Justice for All Advisory Committee, made up of UCSB faculty including Michael Douglas Dean of Humanities Daina Ramey Berry, Casillas, Dean of Social Sciences Charles Hale, and professors Beth Pruitt, Susannah Scott, Jeffrey Stewart and Sharon Tettegah.

This is not the first time De León’s work has been featured on the UC Santa Barbara campus. The Art, Design & Architecture Museum in 2020 hosted his installation “Hostile Terrain 94,” which highlighted the thousands of migrants who have perished while crossing the rugged, vast Arizona/Mexico border.

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edge of the Pacific Ocean.