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# (Review) After Life: An Ethnographic Novel

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literary criticism, cultural studies, political science, anthropology, and so forth) devoted to violence in Latin America. Neither the introduction nor the book in general discuss in an organic fashion current or recent scholarship on violence developed in the field of Latin American studies

In spite of these perceived shortcomings, very difficult to avoid in a collective enterprise of this nature, the book is a significant contribution that will be of interest to literary scholars, both those interested in the topic of violence and on the individual topics addressed by the book.

**Juan Pablo Dabove**

*University of Colorado at Boulder*

TOBIAS HECHT: *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

In 1998, Tobias Hecht published the highly acclaimed book, “At Home in the Street: Street Children of Northeast Brazil” (Cambridge University Press), based on fieldwork he conducted for his dissertation in 1992 in the city of Recife. The book caused a stir in the academic world because it challenged much of what we believed we knew about street children in Brazil and the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in addressing their situation.

In 1999 Hecht returned to Recife, only to find that most of the street children he had been familiar with had either died tragically or been incarcerated in less than humane conditions in local jails or psychiatric institutions. And while Hecht makes clear from the start that, for personal and ethical reasons, he had no intention of revisiting the plight of street children, or poor children who chose to stay and endure conditions at home for that matter, he literally stumbles across an acquaintance from his past who subsequently becomes the subject of this bold and very different book.

Bruna Veríssimo (obviously not her real name) is a young, dark-skinned transgendered prostitute whose “short but frighteningly eventful life,” according to Hecht, “was one of the only sources on the scores of her peers who never lived to become adults” (p. 4). Hecht’s initial intent was to collaborate with Brunna to write an ethnographic biography, along the lines of Michael Herzfeld’s excellent “Portrait of a Greek Imagination: An Ethnographic Biography of Andreas Nenedakis” (University of Chicago Press, 1997). According to this approach, Brunna’s life would become a means by which to know and interpret a much broader set of social institutions and circumstances. With this goal in mind, Hecht began interviewing his subject and, when he left the field a few months later, encouraged her to record her thoughts and observations on her own.

Three years later, however, with a thousand pages of typewritten interview transcripts already in hand, Hecht came to the unsettling realization that a substantial amount of what Bruna had disclosed about herself was untrue. We are not talking here about embellishment or exaggeration, which are part and parcel of any retelling of episodes of social life. We are talking here about wholesale fabrication, imagination, and perhaps delusion.<sup>1</sup>

In light of this unfortunate discovery, Hecht decided to abandon his original project and transform his now decade-long relationship with Bruna into an ethnographic novel. What exactly does that mean? It means that the book is less about particular rituals, ceremonies and events, and the rigorous and detailed observations that constitute the bulk of traditional ethnographies, and more about emotions and images and a literary “evocation of social life ... inspired by observation over the long run” (p. 8). The narrator in this tale is a thinly-veiled foreign anthropologist named Zoë, who returns to the city of Recife after a long absence and who is plagued by a plethora of physical and psychological ailments, not the least of which is her complex and somewhat tortured relationship with Bruna, the subject that she studies.

Through Zoë, we learn about how Recife and, by implication, Brazil has changed over the course of a decade. We learn about the recent and dramatic increase in police violence, and interpersonal violence in general, about the sudden proliferation of gated communities and condominiums that provide refuge for the well-to-do, about sex motels and self-serve by the kilo restaurants, about obesity and bizarre political projects. And we learn about the tragic fate of the dozen of so street children who were the focus of Zoë’s attention the last time she was in town.

Through Bruna, we learn what it’s like to work the streets, what it’s like to be different things to different clients, and what it’s like to be patronized by people who perceive her as a social problem to be either eliminated or cured. Unlike the narrator’s more traditional prose, however, Bruna’s words appear sporadically and intermittently, but thankfully with increasing frequency towards the end of the book, as touching but matter-of-fact and fundamentally disturbing reflections on the immeasurable psychic pain that must be her life.

When I picked up this book, I did not know what to expect. I greatly admire Hecht’s first book on street children in Recife and I continue to assign it for the occasional course I teach on Brazil. And while I respect what he is trying to do

1 The issue of truth telling and ethnography, and oral history in particular, was brought to the fore, as Hecht quite rightly mentions, by the controversy over the testimonies of the Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú. It has also plagued more recent attempts at personal story telling in Brazil. See, for example, Julio Ludemir, *Lembrancinha do Adeus: História[s] de um Bandido* (São Paulo: Planeta, 2004).

in pushing and blurring the boundaries between ethnography and story telling, I wonder if this was the vehicle to employ to bring to light the extraordinary insights revealed by such a seasoned and skillful researcher. As I have already mentioned, the insights provided by his subject and collaborator are rich and deeply moving. I just wonder if there was another, more convincing way to bring those insights to light. My other question has to do with a statement that Hecht makes early on about those who linger and “make a career out of the suffering of others” (p. 3). Sometimes, persistence and consistency count for a lot. Too many researchers, in my opinion, jet in and out of the field to research particular social problems with no sense of commitment or resolve towards those who provide, often without remuneration, the information they crave and need. Furthermore, it is often the insight of researchers who have a long standing relationship with a particular field setting who provide the deepest and most illuminating insights, as evidenced by this book.

**Robert Gay**

*Connecticut College*

RORY M. MILLER AND LIZ CROLLEY (eds.): *Football in the Americas: Fútbol, Futebol, Soccer*. London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2007.

Over the last several decades, football, the world’s most popular sport, has begun to attract well-deserved attention from academics in a variety of disciplines. In general, this scholarship has fallen into two unrelated fields of inquiry. While historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have asked questions about the culture of football, economists and experts in management and marketing have approached the sport with a very different agenda. Although these two groups of scholars undoubtedly have much to say to each other, the potential for intellectual exchange has not yet been realized. As a result, *Football in the Americas* would seem to hold great promise. The result of a major conference held in 2003 at the University of London’s Institute of Latin American Studies (now the Institute for the Study of the Americas), the book brings scholars from the humanities and social sciences together with economists, business school professors, and journalists in order to provide a summary of the current scholarship. Unfortunately, the book suffers from many of the flaws that typically affect published conference proceedings. In particular, the book fails to develop any dialogue between the authors exploring football culture and those analyzing business practices in the sport. Two themes – the current crisis in Latin American football and the impact of globalization – course through virtually all of the essays, but unfortunately the authors ignore each other’s work.