

The argumentative and analytic thrust of *Rituals of Violence in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* emerge from a close reading of the legal archives and bring a fresh historical understanding of the multiple transitions shaping late nineteenth-century Puerto Rico.

*University of California, Davis*

FRANCESCA MILLER

*J. Lat. Amer. Stud.* 39 (2007). doi:10.1017/S0022216X07003252

Tobias Hecht, with portions based on the narrations of Bruna Veríssimo, *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 183, £11.95, pb.

This is a brave and important book that provides a uniquely original yet imperfect account of the encounter between an anthropologist and a homeless youth in Northeast Brazil. Hecht is well known for his excellent study of street children in Recife, *At Home in the Streets* (New York 1998), arguably still the best ethnography of Latin American youth homelessness ever written. *After Life* is both a continuation and a departure from this previous work. It is still centrally concerned with the experience of homelessness in Brazil, but adopts a very different representational form that Hecht styles as ‘ethnographic fiction’. He defines this as ‘an approach to the study and evocation of social life and the world of the mind that emerges from rigorous observation, makes use of certain conventions of ethnographic fieldwork and writing, but also employs literary devices’ (p. 8). *After Life* is thus ‘not a true story, but it aims to depict a world that could be as it is told and that was discovered through anthropological research’ (p. 8). As such, this book is doubly welcome. As Anthony Giddens points out in *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley 1984, p. 285), ‘literary style is not irrelevant to the accuracy of social descriptions’, because ‘the social sciences draw upon the same source of description (mutual knowledge) as novelists or others who write fictional accounts of social life’. *After Life* explicitly seeks to transcend the artificial boundary that exists between the two modes of writing.

Hecht is by no means the first anthropologist to turn to fictional modes of representation. Laura Bohannan, writing under the pseudonym Elenore Smith Bowen, famously wrote an ‘anthropological novel’ entitled *Return to Laughter* (New York 1964), which charted the initial research steps of an anthropologist not altogether dissimilar to her own self among the Tiv of Northern Nigeria, for example. Where *After Life* differs from such previous fictional efforts, however, is in its point of departure, which is the transcripts of Hecht’s interviews with Bruna Veríssima, a transvestite homeless adolescent whom he first encountered in Recife in 1992, and with whom he engaged in an intensive and sustained collaboration between 1999 and 2002. Veríssima comes across as an extremely articulate individual in the portions of *After Life* that are directly based on Hecht’s interviews with her, her testimony providing extensive and detailed information about being homeless, as well as insights into her particular understandings of prostitution, motherhood, gender, violence and the search for happiness. Hecht notes how much of what Veríssima told him ‘happened to be untrue’ (p. 5), however, highlighting in particular how she frequently invented imaginary characters and life-changing events. At the same time, he also argues that everything she told him is ‘plausible’, and that her powerful narrative as a result epitomises the experience of homelessness in

Northeast Brazil exceptionally well. Rather than attempting to unravel the distortions and render the narrative as a traditional ethnography, Hecht suggests that the only way he could do justice to Veríssima's life was 'to yield to her inventions' (p. 6), and adopt a representational form that similarly 'invents characters, distorts events, and omits information' (p. 8).

*After Life* thus presents itself as a novel that charts the journey of Zoë, a young anthropologist returning to Recife (the field site of her previous doctoral research on street children) after several years of absence, and focuses on the particular relationship she has with Aparecida, a young transvestite adolescent street prostitute. The novel is structured in three sections. The first part of the book is almost exclusively focused on Zoë and her return to Recife, while the second is principally about Aparecida. The third is something of a Benjaminian montage, juxtaposing insights from Zoë and Aparecida about their relationship that highlight what they mean to each other. Through this three-part narrative, we learn about the street child Beto's transformation into Aparecida, the reasons that keep her on the streets, why she turned to prostitution, and how these experiences shape her dreams and aspirations, as well as Zoë's struggle to come to terms with the death of her mother, the consequences of an emergency hysterectomy, and the dissonance of return to a place of profound importance for her personal development. The overall storyline can be said to be one of different and ultimately highly contradictory searches for redemption and hope in a difficult world.

Sir Thomas More famously claimed that he was compelled to write his powerful political tract *Utopia* (1516) as 'a fiction whereby the truth, as if smeared by honey, might a little more pleasantly slip into men's minds' (*The Complete Works of Sir Thomas More*, New Haven 1964, p. 251), and in theory, this is one of the great potential strengths of *After Life*, particularly considering the often harrowing nature of its general topic of homelessness. In practice, however, Hecht's literary writing skills are not up to the task. His prose is rather stilted and even self-indulgent at times – particularly when he tries to convey the sense of loss that Zoë feels as a result of no longer being able to bear children – although there are moments when he offers superbly evocative descriptions, including for example of Zoë's emotional conflicts and 'out of body' confusion that she feels as a result of returning to Recife. (This is something that the anthropological methodology literature rarely addresses, but which most anthropologists who have returned to a field site following a prolonged absence will undoubtedly identify with). The general narrative of the novel feels rather fabricated, and although one of the advantages of fictional writing is that it enjoys a freedom that allows it to present 'ideal type' exemplifications of social phenomena in a way that empirically grounded academic literature cannot, many of the situations and persons that Hecht writes come across as somewhat stereotypical. At the same time, these are highly subjective judgements, and it may well be that others find Hecht's writing more to their taste. Overall, however, irrespective of the merits of its prose, this book should be celebrated as a methodological trailblazer that will hopefully lead to numerous successor experimentations in as wide a range of fields as possible.

*Brooks World Poverty Institute, University of Manchester*

DENNIS RODGERS