

Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez: A Border Story*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019. ISBN: 9780374191979 (cloth); ISBN: 9781250251237 (paper); ISBN: 9780374717179 (ebook)

Curiously, “death” comes before “life” in the title of Aaron Bobrow-Strain’s *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez*. Surely Aida, born in Agua Prieta, Mexico in 1987 had a “life” before a “death”. Upon opening the text, however, the logic of the title’s temporal reverse of death and life becomes clear. The book begins in the back of an ambulance, rushing from Agua Prieta toward the US border. Defiantly lucid, a 21-year-old Aida stays awake for the duration of the ride despite her multiple stab wounds as her family desperately seeks to bring her to Arizona to receive medical attention. Aida’s story takes place in tumultuous sections of the Mexico-US borderlands that have been subject to waves of extraction, destruction and militarized reconfiguration. Quoting Audre Lorde, Bobrow-Strain posits that these cumulative processes create a world that Aida was “never meant to survive” (p.350). Yet her life, vividly described through the author’s intimate insights developed over the course of a multi-year friendship, unfolds in spite of the potential social and physical death preceding every step she takes.

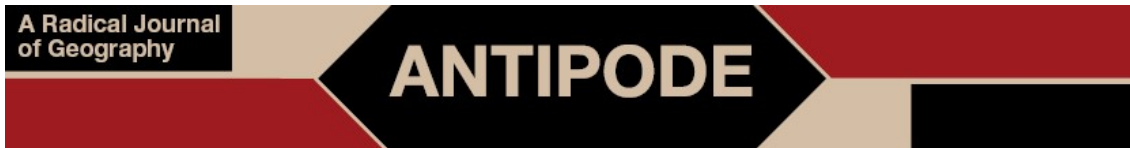
Bobrow-Strain describes *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez* as a work of narrative non-fiction that “theorizes lightly”. It is not a novel, nor a standard academic text. With respect to the latter, therefore, one does not need to have read Marx, Luxemburg or Harvey beforehand to have a visceral appreciation of the capitalist destruction and reconfiguration of the Sonoran Desert described in the book. The author’s precise historical rendering of Douglas, Arizona’s death as a mining town and subsequent re-birth as a node in the border security complex speaks for itself. As does Bobrow-Strain’s sensitive account of the historical patterns through which borders have been made and remade in this expanse of desert in concert with the fortunes of industrial copper mining. Throughout, we are reminded that white populations’ experiences of deindustrialization are met with sympathy whereas for people of color deindustrialization gives

way to ever more pernicious modes of law enforcement. The US-Mexico border is no exception. Bobrow-Strain thus offers an exceptionally gritty glance at how militarized border enforcement feeds off of the detritus of deindustrialization, creating what geographer Scott Warren (2019) dubs “a new kind of company town” in which it is now Customs and Border Protection – not Phelps Dodge – calling the shots.

Certainly, the acumen through which Bobrow-Strain writes is a direct outgrowth of his deep experiences conducting (IRB-approved) field research and writing peer-reviewed texts over his career as a college professor. The book’s extensive footnotes are replete with academic citations. Yet it is the everyday lived experiences of life near, across, and *in spite of* the border – described in a register designed for general audiences – that drive the book’s central narrative. When Aida, her mother and siblings flee Mexico in 1996 and subsequently overstay their short-term guest permits in the United States, they enter a world of “social death” in which their undocumented status largely denies them legal protection against poverty and physical violence.

Yet despite coming of age in the premeditated and racialized violence of industrial dissipation and militarized border enforcement, Aida continually reclaims life amidst death. Resurrection is her stead. Time and again Aida descends deep into the valley(s) of death, whose steep walls are hemmed in by stab wounds, the grind of hunger, and the thick bars of immigrant detention centers. And time and again Aida emerges into new life that would have been entirely impossible had she not so fully confronted the specters of death conjured daily by the militarized border. If one were to read against the grain of the book and “theorize heavily” Aida might be understood as embodying what Jacques Rancière (2004) calls “dissensus” – the thoroughly political act of having the rights one has not.

This is not to say that Aida’s entire existence is defined by the epics of life lived in death’s eclipse. We come to know a little girl who lovingly combs her sister’s hair, feels the thrill of finally doing well on an elementary school English exam, is enamored with the Bowie cult classic *Labyrinth* and develops a taste for Pink Floyd (with a fashion sense to match).



Without a hint of paternal judgement, Bobrow-Strain recounts how Aida drinks 40s and smokes weed with her Douglas High School friends until a particularly astute dance teacher sets some ground rules. In short, we come to know a normal teenager whose escapades are straight from any angsty adolescent textbook – except for the fact that Aida is undocumented. Citizens can and do slip up, but as one of Aida’s mentors is sure to remind her: “Humans make mistakes. Immigrants cannot” (p.353). In turn, Bobrow-Strain narrates a life of challenges, pleasures and mishaps that paint Aida only as all too human – certainly not a dangerous criminal and yet an uneasy fit for the straight-laced, high-achieving “Dreamer” crowd.

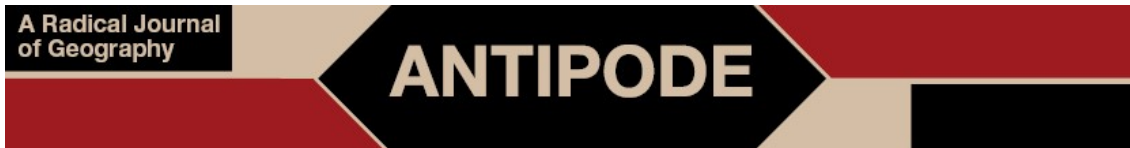
Hence, one of the book’s central insights: the chaos of life lived in spite of the border makes staying with immigration law’s strict purview essentially impossible. For so many, the trepidations and paradoxes of border life are such that life and law cannot be isomorphic. Amidst these impossibilities, the author is unequivocal in calling for undocumented migrants to be able to establish legal personhood. Relatedly, as Bobrow-Strain is keen to point out, the crises the border causes in everyday life are not indicative of a border crisis itself. The political points scored through fear mongering, the lavish financing for detention centers, and the municipal budgets made dependent on border enforcement show that for many the border is, at the cost of thousands of lives and billions of tax payer dollars, doing exactly what it needs to do. *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez* thus offers a piercing indictment of current immigration policies as evinced through one young woman’s triumphs and tragedies. 22 copies of the book await readers in the Douglas Public Library, each a mirror to the violence sutured into the border.

The text also offers researchers important reflection on how we carry out our work. Lying somewhere “between journalistic nonfiction and ethnography” (p.348), *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez* takes seriously the imperative to tell precise stories in an ethical and sensitive manner. The extent to which the author is able to do this, I maintain, is a central axis on which we should judge the text’s merits. In the final section, “About This Book”, Bobrow-Strain candidly admits he spent the better part of a year convincing himself *not* to write it given the

vertiginous stakes of the ethical implications involved. He is equally candid about the guidelines he and Aida set once they committed to the project. Aida could end the project at any point if she deemed participation unhealthy, and she could review drafts of the text as the book was in process. Finally, Bobrow-Strain promised that her story would reflect the life of a real person with all of its complexities and intrinsic merits. Money is not an off-limits topic in this methodology. Aida's situation is precarious, and the author recognized the need to pay for her groceries and rent from time to time while writing the book. In turn, proceeds are to be split equally amongst the author, Aida and the Chiricahua Community Health Center. In sum, there is no reason why Bobrow-Strain's meditations on conducting research brimming with emotional pain and precarious life cannot make important additions to research methodology classes and give all of us reflective pause on the fraught challenges of our "human-based research".

In the book's closing pages, Bobrow-Strain quotes Philippe Bourgois's paraphrasing of Laura Nader: "Don't study the poor or powerless because everything you say will be used against them" (p.349-350). Yet he, like so many of us in the academy, nonetheless chooses to write, knowing that even scholarship with the best of intentions runs the risk of being turned against the marginalized. "That sad observation applies acutely to accounts of women, people of color, and survivors of sexual violence", he writes. "Throughout the life of this project, I listened to and tried to learn from scholars and activists who are women and people of color as one way to check that danger" (p.350). The stakes of checking that danger are exceptionally high for this book and readers might appreciate more direct insight from Bobrow-Strain on the form and content of those conversations.

The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez illuminates undocumented migrants' reality beyond the standard binary tropes of the "suppliant victim" and the "criminal" (p.344). Given border logics that treat migrants as sub-human, Bobrow-Strain takes an honest yet necessary risk in treating them as "human" instead of as archetypes. It is only through taking such a risk that he



can reveal the devastating depths of the current border arrangement. And as Aida persists in spite of the border, our will to arrange the border otherwise ought not wane.

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