

# H-Net Reviews

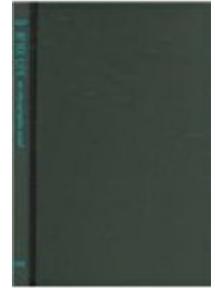
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Tobias Hecht. *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006. 183 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3788-1; \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3750-8.

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## The Importance of Making Things Up

A collective gasp erupted in my history of education class this past summer when I suggested to a student that he “make up” the events of his childhood. The students were asked to pair up, interview each other about their own histories, and craft a short essay on their partner’s past and the decision to become a teacher. The student to whom I gave the offending advice refused, for reasons he chose not to share, to discuss his past with his partner. “So make it up,” I advised. “Craft a narrative about a young man who decides to become a teacher. What in his past experience might have shaped that decision? How are we all ‘made up’ by what we’ve experienced in the past?” In some ways, this technique served to call the young man’s bluff. It put to rest any inkling that I was simply being nosy when I asked my students to talk about their own pasts. What I was after in the assignment was more complex. By mindfully weaving the past into the present, I wanted my students to understand human beings as at once living, breathing historical sources and historically constituted. I wanted them to experience the messiness of historical research and to make them fully aware of the idea that historical writing and research and “the past” can be wide apart. One month later, as I read Tobias Hecht’s *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel*, I was reminded of the method in my apparent pedagogical madness: like the crafting of history, fiction can demonstrate that truths are as powerful, if not more so, than “the Truth.” Both in content and form, Hecht’s work challenges historians of children and youth to think deeply about the limits and possibilities of making things up.

Hecht, an anthropologist, is best known for his ethnographic work on Brazilian street children. In 2002, he won the prestigious Margaret Mead Award for *At Home in the Street: Street Children of Northeast Brazil*. His original intention for *After Life* was to write an ethnographic biography of Bruna Verissimo, a transvestite prostitute whom he had interviewed years before for his doctoral dissertation. Bruna had been on the streets of Recife since age eight, the same year she was raped by her stepfather. As their second collaboration developed, it became clear to Hecht that Bruna’s accounts of her life events were, at least in part, fictionalized, reordered, transposed, or attributed falsely. She was providing a view of life on the street, but Hecht could not be certain that it was her life; or “life” as unmediated experience. “Life” as a constructed reality, however, is what Hecht pursues. He labels what emerges from this collaboration an “ethnographic fiction,” a form that blends the “fact-gathering” research of an anthropologist with the storytelling imagination of a fiction writer. Hecht explains, “[i]t is 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).

The “could be” world that emerges in Hecht’s fiction is horrifying. But it is made all the more so because it could easily be true. Through the two main characters of the novel, Aparecita, the young homeless transvestite on the streets of Recife, and Zoë, an anthropologist whose relationship with Aparecita parallels Hecht’s account of his experiences with Bruna, readers are reminded how

exclusive, tenuous, and constructed “childhood” is. Zoë, the anthropologist, descends further and further into a crisis of conscience and identity. It is no longer possible for her to behave as the detached academic, an “intelligence gatherer” as she had referred to herself years before (p. 18). She knows that she must try to “save” the children she sees everyday, roaming the streets and begging for money, cigarettes, and food. This realization—its impossibility and necessity—marks her spiral downward towards despair and physical and mental exhaustion. The stories of the children’s lives make her downfall inevitable. Aparecita tells Zoë: “I would go out with men, but there was no penetration. I was only ten. I would touch them and they would give me some spare change, a hand out, some food, one thing or another. It was also a matter of getting experience, I wanted to learn. At the time I was very young, I had never gotten into a car with a strange man. But the men who paid me to go with them thought only about feeling pleasure. It didn’t matter to them that I was a child” (p. 87).

For Aparecita, and countless other children, real and imagined, youth guarantees nothing. This is a particularly useful reminder for historians. It is not a shield against abuse, hunger, addiction, or mistreatment. It doesn’t automatically translate into a time of protection, guidance, healthy development, and care. Instead, the very characteristics associated with the category “child”—innocence and vulnerability—provide a kind of permission for Aparecita’s exploitation. In order to survive, Aparecita and other similarly exploited and abused children must reject the very categories that place them in harm’s way. For street-involved youth, ending childhood

actually helps mitigate against continued mistreatment. What outsiders might read as their “loss of innocence” is a necessary strategy for street kids’ survival.

*After Life* generates conversations and questions that are critical for historians of children and youth. What is a child and how do we know? How have ideas regarding children’s innocence and vulnerability both enlightened and clouded our way through the past? What about the issue of finding children’s “voices” in the past? Is a youngster who speaks and lives like an adult still a child? Is this the kind of voice we are comfortable hearing and giving legitimacy to? Upon what bases should we make this decision? What is the purpose of our scholarship?

We do not make up the past for children and youth, but how much of our work demands that we imagine how youngsters felt about, or reacted to, any given historical situation or set of circumstances? In this regard, Hecht’s weaving of the testimony of the real-life Bruna Verissimo into the voice of the fictional character Aparecita is instructive: “what matters is that [Bruna] rendered her stories with a palpable awareness of what could be truth” (p. 12). There is much to be gained by paying close attention to the way “truths” are crafted in a variety of disciplinary traditions. Unlike writers of fiction or, in this case, ethnographic fiction, however, historians are not supposed to make things up. But this was not Hecht’s ultimate goal either. The “truths” historians craft, not entirely unlike those imparted through Aparecita’s life on the street, are partial at best, subject to the vagaries of interpretation and judgment, often fleeting, but meaningful just the same.

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