

Book Review: Aaron Bobrow-Strain, 'The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez: A Border Story,' Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. 2019.

*By Elizabeth Dauphinee**

'The story of Aida's life doesn't have to prove a point to have value,' writes Michelle Goldberg in her favorable *New York Times* review of Aaron Bobrow-Strain's new book. Set along the borderscape of Mexico and Arizona, Bobrow-Strain meticulously reconstructs the life of one young woman as she emerges in the political and historical context of the militarization of the US border beginning in the late 1980s. Despite its obvious interest for 'politics', Goldberg calls the book an 'illuminating work of literature', rather than an 'ideological tract', because '[u]ltimately...Bobrow-Strain's tale is too full of singular contingencies to yield obvious prescriptions.'¹ Political complexity, it is worth noting, is not reducible to singular contingencies, even if singular contingencies are present within the landscapes of history. And while he doesn't have a prescription, Bobrow-Strain does indeed have a politics.

Aida Hernandez is at once a biography, an ethnography, and a genealogy of border life and of people's entanglements within and across it. It is richly dynamic. Bobrow-Strain traces the connections and flows of trans-border family and economic relations, and he shows how the development of specific discourses following the collapse of local economies has impacted the social landscape, limiting its political possibilities. In this way, he also offers us an ethics of how to think about the border and all of its interlaced phenomena – its human and terrestrial geographies, its multilayered historical contexts, its trans-border economic and social being-together, the consequences of austerity, poverty, and external intervention. This is a deeply situated text that foregrounds the tensions, contradictions, and social complexities that actually animate people's lives; in this case, a girl whose value is not reducible to the innocence or 'worthiness' associated with the DREAM Act. It is not about being worthy. It is about being human. But Bobrow-Strain also resists the universalism that typically accompanies such macro viewpoints. He avoids assimilating the story into a single trajectory of meaning and, in so doing, he disrupts the calcified landscape of political debate on immigration. He also refuses the salvific move that would offer us an escape via the relief of the successful immigration hearing. He asks for a different kind of political conversation.

The reader comes to know that the system does not 'work', and that it is its entire epistemological structure that is implicated in its failure. It is luck that saves Aida. She has a US citizen son, she is fluent and educated in English, she is smart and able to grasp and respond to the legalities governing her situation, she has avoided a criminal history. In this book, we find no victims and no heroes; just the juxtaposition of lives arrayed across a painfully bisected world; we find luck and unluck and their interplay, we find violence and love, and we find that it is

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¹ Michelle Goldberg, 'The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez,' [New York Times](#), May 2, 2019.

difficult to tell the difference between love and abuse, whether in the household or in the hands of the state. There is no ‘lesson’ in this text that we could apply. Goldberg is right.

Bobrow-Strain writes: ‘I wanted to make a book that expanded the boundaries of empathy and justice to include people whose messy lives don’t fit into our narrow and unrealistic narrative of the ‘good immigrant/bad immigrant’ binary.’ Although he crafts and curates the stories, he also does a good job of stepping out of their way. He allows them to illuminate different sets of social relations that the reader is (mostly) treated as competent to interpret. Bobrow-Strain does not make an argument; he transports the reader into a world against which there is no sensory defense. The reader is touched by the trauma that structures Aida’s life, and this trauma is not solely personal, nor merely incidental, but it is *political* first and foremost. There is a relation between empathy and politics here that bears recognizing. The book shows the relation between political fear and the contours of everyday life – illuminated in things like child abuse and domestic violence. But, while it is undeniable that Aida is a casualty of the US immigration system, the reader is also touched by something more than these well-worn narratives of abjection. Aida steps into relief in the fullness of her humanity. Her predicament is impossible, but she still brings the full range of her agency to bear both within and despite this ‘system’ that, as Bobrow-Strain points out more than once in the book, is designed specifically to destroy her. Goldberg writes: ‘...Bobrow-Strain depicts [Aida as] ebullient and indomitable, a smart, fiercely loving survivor. She is also impetuous, often shortsighted and frequently derailed by her own compounding trauma. Aida’s situation leaves her no margin for error, but she errs anyway. She’s a radiantly optimistic character in a relentlessly bleak, unlucky world.’ This narrative, of course, moves the reader. It produces – like much great literature does – this measure of empathy that Bobrow-Strain talks about. But Bobrow-Strain is also careful to note that ‘empathy isn’t enough.’ This is what illuminates *Aida Hernandez* as something otherwise than a novel, and otherwise than an academic text – although it also most emphatically *is* both of these things. The author illuminates not just the intimate details of one woman’s life, but also the complex, rich historical, socio-economic, and political contexts within which this life is situated – confirmed by archival and interview research.

After several deportations, a nearly fatal stabbing, and months in detention, and against all the odds (the immigration judge who hears the case boasts a 96% rejection rate), Aida wins her circuitous bid to remain in the United States. The reader is flooded with relief. But lurking within the relief lies also the reason why empathy cannot be enough – the reason why history, theory, and politics are necessary – not to offer a prescription, but for an expansion of our understanding – an opportunity to change the terms of the debate – or perhaps to refuse it somehow. There are hundreds of thousands of humans in Aida’s position whose cases are denied or not heard at all, who have languished for years in detention, who are kept from their children, who have signed away their rights without knowing it. Bobrow-Strain does not abstract Aida’s life into the universal plight of the migrant. He shows concretely the intimate relations with intimate others – friends, lovers, family – across the boundary. He shows how the intertwined nature of border life stretches out across generations, simplified and flattened for the watching world so that

something can be done. This, of course, is a classical problem of ‘foreign’ intervention – the intervener digests a deeply reductionist understanding of the local landscape, and it is this – not any pre-existing understanding of the social fabric – that informs action. In International Relations, this is a familiar and painful refrain.

One of the things I like best about this book is also the thing that I can see might make it consternating for some readers. He doesn’t offer a pathway for repair. This is also Xymena Kurowska’s point (*JNP* 5:2, 2019) - that it is unnecessary to rush to resolution or repair, despite the obvious relief this might provide for us as readers. This brings us back to Goldberg’s observation that the text is unable to provide a political way forward. She is partially right when she says that this is because there are ‘singular contingencies’. Singular contingencies are what gives otherwise rote decisions and ideas pause for reflection. Something happens. We come to see something that the state did not prepare us for – its own injustice. And we come to understand that the injustice is not incidental or accidental. Rather, it is structural in both its form and in its content. I think that Bobrow-Strain’s genealogy of the institutions and norms that have developed around the carceral immigration system show us that the injustice he is illuminating is inherent to our political order as it is currently constituted. The indictment is not merely about a broken system. It is about how our society has come to construct such a system. And how easily it is accomplished.

It’s not a stretch to say that Bobrow-Strain has written a *Grapes of Wrath* for our time – a deep, situated, complex study of a mass migration in conditions of a fundamental economic and political violence that goes far, far beyond the question of the contingent suffering of one woman and her family. The armies of the displaced in this hemispheric political economy are forced into a grey world of poverty, violence, and constant evasion of the punitive reach of the state. After her successful hearing, Aida does not sail off into the sunset in pursuit of some aspirational and satisfying American dream. I hoped for it. I admit it. But Bobrow-Strain, of course, did not allow it. Instead, Aida begins her new, legal life in New York City. This life is marked by chronic hunger and backbreaking physical labour in a bid to survive that other system bent on destroying her – unregulated American capitalism and the human struggle that is both its raw material and its limitless product. Bobrow-Strain knows this, too. Here, Aida can find no political camaraderie – as her father did in 1960s revolutionary Mexico – beyond the personal bonds that are forged between friends and acquaintances as they make their way through a hyper-individualized, capitalist landscape – the same philosophical ground, incidentally, that conceives and applies the highly atomistic discourse of ‘worthiness’ and ‘innocence’.

Bobrow-Strain is careful not to assign too much moral meaning to the different processes and events he portrays. The importance of this is that it allows the reader to think *with* the text, rather than asking the reader to submit to the text’s own interpretation. He is careful not to assign internal thought processes to informants unless they specifically identified having had those thoughts or feelings during interview processes. He shared drafts of the text with the woman he calls Aida, allowing her to intervene in the process of her own portrayal. This is an ethics not only because it explicitly recognizes the risks of being ‘authored’ by others, but also because it

tries to cede some of that self-reconstructing authority, difficult as it may be to achieve. The text also allows for ambiguity. That is central, I think, to the ethos of the book – that is, to illuminate a life and its contexts, not to argue a political point. He allows for his subjects' lapses in memory, for their unresolved silences, and for the necessary incompleteness of traumatic expression. Bobrow-Strain's writing techniques and the rules that he sets for himself are aimed at maintaining an ethics when the boundaries between self and other reveal themselves to be professional needs and fabrications rather than anything properly meaningful to 'research'. While these boundaries are indeed porous (and often to the point of disintegration), the concerns of structural power remain. Bobrow-Strain, a political scientist, knows this, too. There is no perfect way of dealing with this inherent problem of representation, political or otherwise; it is an inherited problem in all of our disciplines that shapeshifts across different registers and landscapes depending on context. This problem is not resolved by intimacy. Both intimacy and mutuality are dangers for ethics, as Levinas reminds us. To his great credit, Bobrow-Strain does not mistake his empathy for Aida for ethics. Affect, even love, does not stand in for ethics. And love also risks an ethical violence; that is, our feeling of love for, or investment in, particular individuals' lives (the feeling that makes us happy when Aida's case is successful), also lends itself to the ignoring of the calls for justice that are pressing in from other locations. So, Bobrow-Strain weaves the stories of others throughout the text, situating Aida in meaningful proximal familial, social, and historical relations, reminding the reader of those hundreds of thousands we did not meet, or whom we met only briefly. He does not let you forget. These are the people who are still submerged by this system, and who are still seeking justice.