Society for the Anthropology of Work • Book Forum: Threshold

A Threshold of Workers

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“I was still eager to hear Alex’s stories about life on the frontlines” (p. 5), writes Ieva Jusionyte at the beginning of *Threshold: Emergency Responders on the US-Mexico Border*. This pronouncement is a move to stay put, a keenness that is left with the reader at the end of this remarkable ethnography. Jusionyte brings together fragments of workplace stories, uncanny coincidences, flashes of magical realism, and other accounts of life on the frontlines. Written in a plain style, accessible as stories should be, these fragments generate a profusion of evidence articulated in a powerful and absorbing narrative.

This life on the frontlines is not simply the life of emergency workers, but the life of emergency workers at the line, the border between Mexico and the United States. This distinctive perspective analytically transforms the border into a threshold. Life at the frontline is life at the threshold of the state. What, then, does life at the threshold look like? What subjectivities are forged at the intersection between territorial sovereignty and vital security? And how does the work of firefighters on both sides of the border legitimize or delegitimize the state? Jusionyte’s book offers answers to these and other questions.

Through the book’s pages, the reader realizes that the work of the emergency responders spills into both tactical and critical infrastructures, into the logic of security on the one hand and of vital safety on the other. This frontline is revealed to be a “blurring of emergency medical services and border policing” (p. 15), a “fusing of violence and aid” (p. 16). The technology of war, which claims territorial sovereignty, uses the landscape to produce violence and injuries; the biopolitical power of emergency response maintains vital flows and life in circulation. For Jusionyte, these two mechanisms are manifestations of the left and right hands of the state, or the two sides of environmental terror, as Mark Duffield (2011: 760) has defined it, adding that “everything that touches or supports life can be turned around. Everything can be weaponized.” The threshold is thus an uncanny condition, in which the machinery of death is both the familiar and the repressed side of the technologies of life. Jusionyte plumbs the depth of this condition in the remote areas of the desert, where the threshold’s features become clearer and more absolute: no government, no police stations, but checkpoints and pain medication. Approaching the core of the territorial and biopolitical projects of the state, this ethnography finds the unease of silence, survival sovereignty, and slow death.

The firefighters that Jusionyte meets work the seams of these two projects. They are never taken by surprise. They live in the just-in-time temporality of uncertainty. They are trained to see vulnerabilities and potential dangers in the built environment. They “didn’t talk politics” (p. 120). Emergency responders are not cynical, however, nor are they making “a statement of potentiality” (Harvey and Knox 2015: 178). Their practices are, rather, “a matter of survival” (p. 28). Under certain circumstances they can cross the border and work together. This crossing does not resemble the neoliberal porosity of vital systems and economic flows. Instead, it traces its source to a distant time, or perhaps to a sense of the local that cannot be completely compromised by the state project. This crossing may be a “political excess” (Chalfin 2010: 68) that emerges from the historical superimposition of different legacies. The temporal scale that Jusionyte proposes is, after all, that of the *longue durée*: “The binational brotherhood [of firefighters] is over a hundred years old now, with many examples of cross-border cooperation on the record” (p. 90). These are produced through the camaraderie of “those who did the dirty work on the ground” (p. 126), not the managers or analysts of the emergency.

Camaraderie, here, is the trust that emergency responders put in each other when they work on the frontlines, as the “human shield” (p. 118) of any state. In this sense, their work might be seen as enacting another kind of *polis*. It is precisely this twilight relation between the work of emergency responders and the threshold that makes this book a precious ethnography, and that leaves the reader eager to hear more about this life on the frontlines.

Author Bio

Elisabetta Campagnola is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation is an ethnographic inquiry into the world of logistics from the point of view of labor, focusing on past and contemporary forms of political action emerging within the circuits and technologies of circulation. She conducted her dissertation fieldwork with truck drivers and mechanics in Tanzania.

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