

Review

Wallbangin': Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.

Susan A. Phillips

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999

383 pp.

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Taking on a topic with all the cachet of a “current event” and incorporating her impressive skills as a photographer, Susan Phillips may win a wide readership for anthropology with her book *Wallbangin'*. Despite some theoretical problems, the book is an engaging, accessible read and can serve as a useful introduction to the subject of graffiti and urban gangs in the U.S. as seen through an ethnographic perspective.

Wallbangin' opens with a long series of epigraphs, or “extracts” as Phillips titles them, drawn from various sources including the Christian Bible and twentieth-century novels, all referring to some form of “writing on the wall.” From there, the first chapter offers an introduction to “Graffiti for Beginners” which presents a good survey of the ethnographic literature, albeit with some limitations. In particular, Phillips gives short shrift to two exceptionally interesting articles on graffiti (Sanchez-Tranquilino [1995] and Stewart [1994]), providing for each only a simplistic synopsis. Following a review chapter on “Understanding Gangs,” Phillips’ ethnographic material is presented in separate chapters on Mexican-American and African-American gang graffiti. After a brief detour into hip-hop graffiti, which she considers basically non-gang-related (in marked contrast to the typical law enforcement view), Phillips then ties together the divergent strands of the book in her conclusion.

The book may well represent what can be good and bad about anthropology. This tension is most clearly evident in her sometimes problematic use of “gang” as a social category. Pursuing a project of

“humanizing what has popularly become the savage enemy...” Phillips offers to crack an imagined consensus in the U.S. which paints gangs as public enemy number one. Indeed, she is largely successful in critiquing the “reductionist views of gang members” common to non-gang observers. Yet the cultural construction of “the gang” as a social category all too often goes uncriticized in *Wallbanger*, and Phillips joins a tradition of gang studies that begins with the notion of the gang as a social problem. Moreover, she contradicts the more nuanced parts of her book which defy stereotyping when, for example, she refers to people as “gang members” without knowing anything about them except that they wear khakis.

In its best moments, however, the book makes a much-needed argument (one that is well-supported by her ethnography) that gang life is not an epiphenomenon of an immutably violent genetic (racial) or cultural character. Rather, she argues that the violence associated with gangs is tragically, “almost pathologically” human (89). Thus, for example, Phillips warns the reader not to condemn inter-barrio warfare while celebrating military actions conducted on behalf of “legitimate” society, such as the U.S. invasion of Panama.

Unfortunately, the potentially provocative theoretical stance suggested in moments like this is not always maintained. Her discussion of gang members’ use of the intransitive verb “represent” as a performative moment of cultural production and group formation is intriguing, but she later misses an opportunity to expand on that thesis as well. In addressing the romanticizing view of gangsters as proto-revolutionaries, Phillips argues that they are essentially rebels without a cause: she writes “...ultimately even they ask themselves ‘What are we fighting for?’ and have no real answer” (306). It is not clear, however, how the notion of “rebellious” differs from “representing”; that is, why the former must be understood in a transitive sense while the latter requires no object. Could it not be that both rebellion and representation in this context refer to some kind of subject formation? Phillips does not take time to explore such a connection, instead relying on the reformist mold that sees “gang” activity as inherently juvenile or underdeveloped.

In the end, Phillips has produced an interesting and visually beautiful book, not least because of her formidable body of research. In his blurb on the back cover, Alan Dundes sums up the work thus: “An intrepid young white female anthropologist armed only with her

camera enters the forbidding turf of Chicano and African American gangs in Los Angeles to photograph their graffiti...” This characterization neatly encapsulates both the problem and the promise of such a project. Dundes, the elder folklorist of graffiti, seems in his praise to be embarrassingly deaf to those who would decolonize and desensationalize anthropology. Yet Phillips does deserve props for crossing powerful social boundaries close to home and attempting what Dundes once called “hard-core ethnography.” Her sincere personal reflections on the experience of fieldwork may prove helpful for the fledgling researcher and a critical reading of this text may inspire further work in such fields.

References

- Sanchez-Tranquilino, Marcos. 1995. Space, Power, and Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals in East Los Angeles, 1972–1978. In *Looking High and Low: Art and Cultural Identity*. Ed. Brenda Jo Bright and Liza Bakewell. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Stewart, Susan. 1994. Ceci Tuera Cela: Graffiti as Crime and Art. In *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation*. Durham: Duke University.

