A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos
Vol. 22, Núm. 1 (Fall 2024): 352-356

Review / Reseña

Griffin, Alba. *Reading the Walls of Bogotá: Graffiti, Street Art, and the Urban Imaginary of Violence.* Pittsburgh, PA.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023. 196 pp.

Daniela Samur
University of Utah

Diego Felipe Becerra was shot and killed by the police in 2011 for painting the walls under a bridge in Bogotá. He was sixteen years old. While the police planted a gun at the crime scene, accused Becerra of committing a robbery nearby, and hired fake witnesses, Becerra's parents and the friends who were with him that night stressed that he had not done anything wrong. Although the media immediately upheld the story invented by the police, it slowly moved to show Becerra's middle-class background, which, as per the prejudiced assumptions of many, was incompatible with his portrayal as a criminal. Becerra's murder was only solved ten years later, but in the meantime, it raised public debates about the legality of graffiti and street art, the corruption of the police, and the state-led or state-supported violence in Colombia. The murder of Diego Felipe Becerra was far from extraordinary, as many young people are criminalized and killed daily in Bogotá. But his case was a turning point for the place of street art and graffiti in the city, and as such, it is the start and end point of Alba Griffin's *Reading the Walls of Bogotá: Graffiti, Street Art, and the Urban Imaginary of Violence.*

An urban ethnography, Griffin's book studies the production and reception of graffiti and street art to understand the social imaginaries of violence in Bogotá—

that is, the "collective representations and shared ways of seeing" (9). The book is based on ethnographic work in Bogotá during nine months between 2015 and 2016, as well as on twenty-one interviews with artists, *barristas* (organized *fútbol* fans), representatives from local government offices, and Diego Felipe Becerra's parents; five vox pops in front of "clear examples of different kinds of graffiti and street art" in various places of the city; and four focus groups, each one at a different university in Bogotá (22). The fifty-five photos taken by Griffin not only show the sheer extent and diversity of graffiti and street art in the city but convey her attentiveness to both their content and location in the walls of Bogotá. Throughout the chapters, Griffin weaves in her experiences on the streets, her sharp and perceptive reading of urban spaces, and the voices of people in Bogotá with a wide range of scholarship in persuasive ways. As a result, *Reading the Streets of Bogotá* presents an "interplay of narratives" that shows the contradictory character of imaginaries of violence and the power relations that shape the production and reception of graffiti and street art (40).

For Griffin, the interviews and conversations are particularly important, as one of her premises is listening carefully to people in order to take them "seriously as vernacular theorists." Talking and listening, Griffin explains, is key to attaining a "more nuanced understanding of what violence feels like in the everyday life" (9). Precisely because of that, it is worth lingering here on the focus groups. Griffin was careful to do them at both public and private universities and thus listened to students from different class backgrounds. But they were all students nonetheless, and thus in their early twenties. While people's class, political positions, and disciplinary interests shape their visions of order and violence, and how they engage with graffiti and street art, there is a generational bias in the choice to do focus groups only at universities that merited at least a brief explanation.

After an introduction that explains the differences and commonalities between graffiti and street art, the range of subcultures within them, and the specificity of Bogotá's graffiti and street art, Griffin dedicates the first chapter to presenting the conceptual framework of the book. Griffin's engagement with cultural and political theorists, philosophers, urban scholars, and geographers—including Antonio Gramsci, James C. Scott, Slavoj Žižek, Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Arjun Appadurai, and Jacques Rancière, among others—allow her to ponder extensively on violence, the imaginary, and graffiti and street art. Albeit thorough and clear, the first chapter is slightly dense. To a certain extent, Griffin overly justifies her choices, and the excess of analytical categories discussed in the introduction and the first chapter

distract from the book's main purpose and the engaging, compelling, and carefully crafted three chapters that follow.

The "empirical" chapters focus on three case studies, which show the relationship between violence and the everyday, and its spatialization in the city (25). Griffin's conceptualization of violence, a theme too common in stories and academic works about Colombia, is worth stressing. *Reading the Streets of Bogotá* problematizes how Bogotá and Colombia have often been solely defined through the "myth" of violence and offers an analytical framework to comprehend both ideas and experiences of violence in urban spaces (5). Griffin "maintains an open approach to the concept of violence" and divides it into three broad categories: political (also defined as direct), structural, and cultural, and examines how and why they are entangled (32). Violence needs to be understood in a "continuum," Griffin proposes, to "challenge the supposed exceptionalism of some forms or spaces of violence while making visible that which is often taken for granted or not seen as violence" (32). For the author, the imaginaries of violence in Bogotá are then related to the armed conflict and state-perpetrated crimes, as well as exclusions, poverty, hunger, *barrista* or gang-related territorial disputes, fears, and more. The notion of continuum, Griffin states, helps to unravel the "multiplicity" of everyday violence in Bogotá, which albeit structural, is also ever-changing and place-specific (5).

Chapter 2, Griffin's first case study, focuses on the "idea of the everydayness of political violence" through an analysis of Calle 26, a major street in Bogotá that "juxtaposes different urban realities" (55). Calle 26 connects the city's center with the airport; it is a financial center; and it is the location of many government offices and Colombia's main public university, the Universidad Nacional. More importantly, perhaps, Calle 26 is an obvious choice for studying graffiti and street art, as it has been a key place for social protests in the city and is where many narratives of memory coalesce. On Calle 26, Griffin explains, state-supported large-scale commemorative murals coexist alongside other visual denunciations of state-led violence, which makes the street a space for collective and competing memories of violence. Calle 26 is "an axis of both memory and countermemory," and where the content of graffiti and street art is "explicitly political" (59-60). Murals, *pintas*, paste-ups, and political slogans depict civilian victims (Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples in particular), denounce displacement, dispossession, and *desapariciones*, and portray the state as the main perpetrator of crimes. Street art and graffiti might be "performative" acts of

"transgression," but Griffin concludes that their sheer extent and presence also help to normalize violence and to accept it as part of the everyday (68-9).

The third chapter studies "the politics of representation" in La Perseverancia and Ciudad Bolívar, two low-income and working-class areas of the city often perceived as dangerous, which have been systematically marginalized and criminalized. By studying the more recent beautification projects, and the role of two collectives, Griffin explains how artists, neighbors, and state officials use street art and graffiti to promote inclusion and to destigmatize the neighborhoods and the people living in them. In La Perseverancia and Ciudad Bolívar, where multiple forms of violence are always present, most graffiti and street art do not make any explicit references to the state, the armed conflict, or the peace process, but celebrate the neighborhoods' traditions, and opt for colorful and "aesthetically pleasing" images (107). As Griffin explains throughout the book, graffiti and street art are not always a form of subversion. But that does not mean either that paintings on the walls are mere adornments, or simply an indication of gentrification. Processes of beautification in La Perseverancia and Ciudad Bolívar do not unravel forms of violence, but they do reassert people's agency in representing themselves, producing art, and claiming the rights to the city, albeit in limited ways. Readings of beautification projects within an overly simplistic logic of either romanticization or condemnation, Griffin argues, fundamentally elide the negotiations, power struggles, and forms of violence that shape the processes of production and reception of graffiti and street art.

The fourth and final chapter examines the politics of aesthetics in the case of La Candelaria, Bogotá's most "traditional" neighborhood in the downtown area. Although less grounded in the space of the neighborhood, the chapter explores how graffiti and street art are simultaneously celebrated as a form of cultural capital key to the "revitalization" of the city's center and denigrated as "urban blight" and condemned as illegitimate. Graffiti and street art in Bogotá exist then within an "aesthetic hierarchy" (131, 136). To study it, Griffin discusses the subcultures of graffiti and street art, their content, the gendered and classed discriminations that artists face, and the conditions of production. Only in doing so is it possible to understand the simultaneous institutionalization of graffiti street art via decrees, funding, or tours, and the criminalization and demonization of artists and certain forms of visual expressions. In La Candelaria, graffiti and street art make explicit references to violence, as was the case with Calle 26, but broader hegemonic notions of "visual order" fundamentally hide poverty and reinforce displacement,

dispossession, and ongoing cycles of violence. The chapter proposes that aesthetic hierarchies and judgments about taste and value are always a manifestation of deep-seated social, political, and spatial hierarchies, too.

Although the book's central argument is not always clear, Griffin does explain why art, culture, and, more specifically, graffiti and street art are "key sites" and "practices" through which violence is enacted, reproduced, challenged, denounced, and negotiated. The graffiti and street art in Calle 26, La Perseverancia, Ciudad Bolívar and La Candelaria, Griffin says, all bring to the forefront a "somewhat pessimistic impression of urban imaginaries of violence" (25-6). The contradictory ways in which people in Bogotá interpret and interact with graffiti and street art is a manifestation of the daily reproduction of social and spatial hierarchies, structural inequalities, and the active role of the state in commanding and silencing violence. Thoroughly researched and written, *Reading the Streets of Bogotá* is a compelling read for people interested in the relation between culture and politics, contemporary violence, and urban spaces in Latin America and beyond.