

Review of “We live in the Shadow” Inner-City Kids Tell Their Stories through photographs by Elaine Bell Kaplan

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“We live in the Shadow” Inner-City Kids Tell Their Stories through photographs

by Elaine Bell Kaplan

Temple University Press, 2013, 193 pages

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Reviewed by Mark Dunford, University of Brighton

Elaine Bell Kaplan’s short book *“We live in the Shadow” Inner City Kids tell their Stories through photographs* provides a descriptive account of a participatory photography project in South Central Los Angeles, an area of high poverty, crime and related social problems. Over a two year period fifty-four young people aged 12-15 from the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) were given cheap cameras and asked to chronicle their everyday lives. The resulting pictures were gathered together under specific themes and considered by participant focus groups looking at the history of South Central LA, school, neighborhood experiences and family life. Additional contributions from fifteen parents and a group of 21 students from University of Southern California add breadth to the study.

Like many community based arts or media projects *“We Live in the Shadow”* was inspired by a desire to provide excluded people with a means to express themselves through creative endeavor; to use creativity as a means for young people to shine an understanding light on their everyday experience. The introductory section describes how the Photovoice methodology underpinning the project draws on the influential work of C Wright Mills and Paulo Friere to explicitly link photography and social change. Seeing is a route to understanding the lives lived by these young people. By giving them cameras so they can take their own photographs the project seeks to empower them by locating critical authorship firmly in their hands. Simple photography enables the young people to visually define their position in society and the outcome combines a curious mix of the optimism of youth with a disheartening sense of the inequalities at the heart of LA Life, and because of this it is a book bristling with anger rather than analysis.

For many people, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb's 1972 study of the lives of working class people in Boston, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, is a defining text. It seeks to understand the dynamics of class in the USA and shows how people internalize inequality as a means of coping with injustice. By focusing on the everyday lives of young people, Kaplan's book takes a similar approach to understanding experience but extends this to a wider set of concerns than class so it explicitly addresses race and gender. It uses photography to explore the dynamics around the four prioritized themes so the imagery provides a disheartening sense of the quotidian. For example, the section describing dirty school bathrooms as places where "*the floors are often 'wet and sticky'.....and smell of human waste*" is illustrated by a simple photograph of an unflushed toilet. This single image (figure 5.6, page 61) triggers comment from a young people's focus group which in turn draws in a wider critique from parents and staff around causation. It highlights the unusual position of the young people from the NAI programme. They are from the neighbourhood yet it is reasonable to wonder how representative or typical they are, and to be fair the book recognizes this dilemma so the NAI is a catalyst for wider discussion. The young people are, at least in part, actors defined by their individual membership of the NAI programme.

Images used throughout the book have a simple, direct power. Much of the debate in the text investigates why the photographer took a particular picture. It questions where the lens was pointed and asks why people and landscapes were turned into images addressing the themes underpinning the study. In doing this it tries to get to show how the young people see the world so we can understand their perception. A number of images are staged or manipulated to highlight a particular point and, while these have a certain power, it is the more descriptive and naturalistic images chronicling everyday experience which bring a greater depth to the study. These use imagery to corroborate and critique the world. The cover shot which gives the book its title is a case in point. A simple picture (figure 1.1) of a railroad with the shadow of the photographer in the bottom left hand corner highlights the simultaneous

presence and absence of the author, a figure who is seen but not recognized. It uses imagery to hint at the unspoken truth of exclusion; "*we live in the shadow, and no one sees that we are here*" says the photographer to underline the point.

Photovoice projects often work with groups where photography is used to convey testimony of those who words fail, but in this case it is more overtly about what cannot be readily said. *We Live in the Shadow* is inspired by Photovoice and shares much with many community based photography in that it seeks to bring everyday hidden stories into the present. In this way, it is a simple authoritative means to empowerment for the young people involved in the NAI programme and this is supplemented through a wider dialogue. This collected testimony adds to the imagery, tells us more about the everyday life and draws in a wider socio-political dialogue around exclusion.

"*We live in the Shadow*" is a strong, cogently argued book. It reads more like an excellent project evaluation than an academic text. The theoretical parts at the start are little beyond a means to frame an account of the study and more could have been done to show how the analytical and theoretical inspirations shape the debate. Linking the different aspects together in a robust way would have strengthened the research and enhanced our understanding of everyday experience of these young people in South Central LA. In doing this it would have succeeded wholly in meeting the challenge set by Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*.

Terry's story about life in the inner city was confirmed by all of the kids who became part of the official study. My next task was to seek out Black and Latino adolescents ages twelve to fifteen who lived in the South Central area, grew up in low-income working families, and would be considered average kids attending the local schools and not involved with drugs or gangs. The NAI kids' families must sign a contract stating that they will commit their families to the goals of the program by abiding by all the rules and attending a Saturday morning workshop offering new strategies related to issues concerning middle schoolers who, because they are in a demanding program, will face new challenges. Their photos and stories show us their response to negative inner-city teen images. We follow them into their schools, and we hear about their creative coping strategies. While these kids see South Central as dangerous, they also see themselves as confident enough to not let the inner city take them down. They refuse to be labeled as "ghetto thugs," as outsiders sometimes do. These outsiders include police, teachers, and other groups representing the institutional voices governing their daily lives. The kids in "We Live in the Shadow": Inner-City Kids Tell Their Stories through Photographs show us their response to negative inner-city teen images. We follow them into their schools, and we hear about their creative coping strategies. While these kids see South Central as dangerous, they also see themselves as confident enough to not let the inner city take them down. They refuse to be labeled as ghetto thugs, as outsiders sometimes do. These outsiders include police, teachers, and other groups representing the institutional voices governing their daily lives. a. The kids in "We Live in the Shadow: Inner-City Kids Tell Their Stories through Photographs" have The inner-city world of at-risk teens through their powerful photos and stories. Back to top. Rent "We Live in the Shadow": Inner-City Kids Tell Their Stories through Photographs 1st edition (978-1439907900) today, or search our site for other textbooks by Elaine Bell Kaplan. Every textbook comes with a 21-day "Any Reason" guarantee. Published by Temple University Press.