Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America, by Robert E. Brenneman

Reviewed by Jennifer Hyslip

When El Salvador’s civil war came to an end, the United States began an effort to deport thousands of impoverished inner city males who fled to the United States in the midst of the war. Many gang members were sent back to their “home country” in Central America after serving time in prison. To these countries, they brought a well-rounded understanding of what it meant to a gang member, which soon enough traveled throughout the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This movement, along with various social issues was the root of the expansion of gang violence in Central America.

Robert E. Brenneman’s book Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America starts with the introduction of J.J., an employee at a computer hardware wholesaler company in Guatemala. Now a man of good character and devotion to God, J.J. was once a gang member. He grew up in poverty with a mother and brother who abused him. His life at home was the biggest factor that pushed him to live on the streets, where many gave him moral support and sympathy for his life at home. However, “this moral support also carried an expectation” (Brenneman 3). At the young age of nine, J.J. made his first store robbery, which proved his loyalty to the gang. His attachment to the gang, referred to as the “marriage to death”, grew to become extremely intense, as he took upon the role of recruiting other gang members. However, J.J. experienced a revelation and eventually what is known as un hermano or “brother in the faith”, a follower of the Evangelical religion.

Brenneman’s thesis develops into how religious conversion is not a necessary step in the process of breaking free from the gang, but offers an alternative opportunity to reintegrate into society. Through connecting two independent social movements, transnational gangs and the evangelical religion, Brenneman offers a thoughtful, captivating analysis of the relationship between the two.

This relationship is the main focus of the remainder of Homies and Hermanos. Stemming from his infatuation with the movie “Romero”, a movie about the life of the assassinated Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero, he studied abroad in Central America during college. While there, Brenneman became infatuated with the role of the religion in Central America. He argues that the emotional experiences involved with religious conversion allow ex-gang members to let go of their shame, which previously acted as their attachment to la vida loco of a gang. In order to prove this, he begins his work by providing the reader with an overview of the emergence of transnational gangs in northern Central America along with a general background of the evangelical religion.

As a sociologist, Brenneman takes on an ethnographic methodology and interviews sixty-three former gang members, which consisted of fifty-nine men and
four women, from the three countries of what is considered the “Northern Triangle” of Central America- Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. To narrow the group of people involved with gangs, he interviews customers who visit a walk-in tattoo removal clinic, assuring they were ex-gang members. In order to get another perspective on the issue, he interviews thirty experts working at various organizations and ministries that aim at reducing gang violence. Additionally, Brenneman collects field notes from trips to prisons, “red zone” neighborhood, and an evangelical campaign.

By dividing his chapters into smaller sub-categories, Brenneman gives the reader an opportunity to build a foundation of information that is necessary to grasp the culture of not only Central America in general, but also of the overlapping gang and evangelical lifestyles. With an exceptional inclusion of captivating personal accounts and interviews, Brenneman’s clarity allows this work to be read and understood by someone with no previous knowledge on the topic.

While Brenneman provides a thorough insight on the topic predominantly from a sociological perspective, he looks at the infrastructure of a gang in Central America and draws parallels to street gangs in the United States. However, he stops short of further integrating the view from an American Studies perspective. It would have been interesting to discuss United States’ role in eliminating gang violence in Central America, if any. Additionally, further investigating how gang members in the United States escape the “marriage to death” would offer a comparative dynamic.

With regards to the relevance to American Studies course work at Connecticut College, Homies and Hermanos certainly would be an effective contribution in courses that concentrate on the relationship between the United States and Latin America. As transnational gangs are common and pose social concern in Latin America, it is important to open readers to such issues. Additionally, with such a large immigration population in the cities of the United States, readers can use Brenneman’s work to connect the gang culture of Central America to the issues that arise in urban city areas, throughout the country. Overall, Homies and Hermanos gives the reader a captivating outlook into a world that is most likely unfamiliar to students at Connecticut College.