Karen Umemoto addresses the complexity and multiple publics involved in one center of conflict in the violent Los Angeles of the 1990s. Although gang violence in the city certainly pre-dates that decade, gang warfare in the aftermath of the L.A. riots in 1992 seemed more exposed, more dramatic. To an already ailing city faced with rampant restructuring, gang violence hurt that much more. But even though I was personally sensitive to the harm gangs were causing (growing up in L.A. during the same period of time that Umemoto addresses in her book), I still loved and respected individual gang members who, as members of other social groups, happened to be my neighbors, classmates, childhood friends, and even my own brother. So when I heard reports on the nightly news of drive-by shootings, arrests made by the CRASH unit,1 and the overall murder rate in communities such as mine, I questioned why there were never individual names or faces associated with these statistics. It is not that I wanted to romanticize these gangsters, or to justify their violent acts, but I knew the importance of humanizing them.

My, like others’, interpretation of the gang violence in L.A. was from only one vantage point. I was touching one part of an otherwise giant elephant, trying to cope with the entire beast. Karen Umemoto confronts this reality in her *The Truce: Lessons from an L.A. Gang War*, in which she identifies the multiple publics and varying referents involved in experiencing and producing local gang conflict.

Umemoto focuses on the many “publics” (mothers, police officers, victims and offenders, bystanders, community groups, and the media) in an attempt to place individuals in multiple groups simultaneously, thereby capturing the “different epistemological lenses through which diverse populations see and interpret events” (p. 26). By doing so she is able to provide the type of detailed ethnographic analysis usually practiced on far less diverse and more approachable communities in far less dire times and spaces. Her study is up-close, detailed, and nuanced. Her ability to get close to “the war” and still be able to interpret its aftermath from the perspective of her respondents is laudable. Her clear writing style and measured account allows her to accomplish what she sets out to do when she entered the field in 1993; that is, to focus “not only on understanding what may have factually taken place but also on understanding how different groups and individuals experienced and interpreted what had taken place” (p. 13).

Coming from these communities in which emotional responses to the chaos make objective analysis implausible, Umemoto’s work succeeds at being just that. Her objective approach to the violence, however, is interspersed with a critique of the typical “tough on crime” practices employed by law enforcement and the FBI. Her measured approach owes as much to her lens as a planner as to the care she takes at being “prudent” (p. 26) as a researcher. In her attempt, she runs the risk of making what is so emotional for so many people something overly analytical, but such is the fine line that uncomfortably exists between objectivity and subjectivity.

However, Umemoto seems perfectly confident in her approach; confident enough in her extensive field work, personal interviews, and observations so as to never have to embellish the data or romanticize the participants. She succeeds at appearing neutral despite her engaged participation as an ethnographer who spent considerable time in the Oakwood neighborhood where the war and subsequent truce took place. Not since Susan Phillips’s *Wallbangin’: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* (1999) has a study on the intensity and complexity of the activities taking place on the post-riot streets of L.A. been so nuanced, readable, and reliable.

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1Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) was the L.A.P.D.’s gang suppression unit in operation from 1987 to 2000.
Making Umemoto’s study most challenging and engaging are the racial differences and divisions (real and perceived) that exist within the already fractured communities of Oakwood and Mar Vista Gardens, just inland from the famed Venice Beach Boardwalk. Relying on her own analysis of the official response and rhetoric employed to explain the violence in these neighborhoods, she attributes much of the racial tension between the predominantly Latino Culver City Boys and Venice-13 and the predominantly African American Shoreline Crips to media representation (and intensification) of the so-called “Race War.”

To parse the real and imagined spaces and participants involved in the local gang war and its aftermath, she reports on the multiple stakeholders and players involved within eight chapters: (1) Urban Conflict in Multicultural Cities; (2) Understanding the Morphology of Conflict; (3) The Geography of Multiple Publics in Venice; (4) Law Enforcement Policy and the Oakwood Plan; (5) The Racialization of a Gang War; (6) Firefighters: Suppression from Within; (7) Mediators: Negotiation from Within; and (8) Transforming Racial Conflict. It is within these eight chapters that Umemoto also provides multiple theoretical lenses through which to study and potentially understand similar conflicts.

Students of planning and public policy should find Umemoto’s approach familiar, if not enhanced. Students of sociology, geography, and urban studies will undoubtedly use Umemoto’s case study and in-depth approach as a model for how to do qualitative research. What works best about The Truce is, apropos of the subtitle, Umemoto offers lessons from, not lessons about, L.A.’s gang war and subsequent truce. It is this approach that distinguishes her work from the other studies that try to see and understand the entire beast.

REFERENCES