

Book Review

Alison Young: Street Art, Public City. Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination. Routledge, New York 2014.

Preeti Dhaliwal*

I'm listening to Junot Diaz on Youtube and thinking he sounds like the folks I grew up with, the voice I used to have, the one I don't use at school or in papers or for book reviews. I'm listening to Diaz and watching the audience at the same time (where the video allows). The venue looks prestigious: a minimalist aesthetic, one or two expensive looking statues (which I imagine were commissioned especially for that room). One person laughs at all his jokes—a deep-bellied laugh—as the camera scrolls across rows of expressionless people, most of whom appear to be white (Diaz 2010). I'm laughing too—his swearing and casual speech are honest and hilarious, but most of all, comforting. I found a similar comfort in the pages of Alison Young's new book, *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination*, where she weaves together voices of street artists, images of street art and a narrative about reimagining the city as a place of belonging and transformation through street art. Such moments—the ones where my legal and creative interests merge with the power of art as a tool for social change—are rare and precious encounters.

I'm imagining the audience of this book review consists mostly of scholars, and I know scholars love new words so let me begin with an offering for your vocabulary: 'latrinalia', the writing you see on bathroom stalls (Young 2014, 5). As we begin journeying into Young's work and the world of street art, I'd like to invite your imagination to join us. Can you imagine encountering super-sized, black and white portraits of women pasted on walls of public buildings you pass regularly (see Young 2014, 37)? How about a large heart falling out of a plastic sheet covering the

* LLM Candidate, University of Victoria.

façade of a nearby building, revealing the scaffolding behind (see Young 2014, 60)? Is it easier to imagine losing a beautiful object or image you see everyday? How might these encounters impact or affect you and your daily routine?

For those whose imaginations prefer specificity, let us try a more particular encounter. If you're familiar with the street artist Banksy, imagine coming across his artwork on the building you live in (if you're unfamiliar with Banksy, feel free to google his work or imagine a stencil image of a soldier fully armed, gun poised, music notes firing from its tip or a masked figure positioned to throw a Molotov cocktail, his hand grasping a bouquet of flowers instead). Did you know Banksy's street art now increases property value? If it were your property, would you consider the artwork a nuisance and paint over it? Or would you consider it a gift and try to preserve it, perhaps placing plexiglass overtop to protect it from the elements? Perhaps you would focus on the street artwork's value in monetary terms, remove part of the building and post it on E-Bay? But to whom does the street artwork even belong? The property owner, the community, the artist or the city? If you opted for plexiglass, how would you feel if someone poured silver paint behind the glass and wrote 'Banksy woz ere' (see Young 2014, 142)? What if you were a police officer responding to a complaint—would you fine Banksy, or might you exercise your 'aesthetic judgment' and let him walk away with a warning, perhaps even a compliment for his work? These are just a few of the questions that Young, a professor of Criminology in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne, considers in her book.

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Young's book archives her spectatorship of street art and graffiti over the past 20 years while sharing snippets from interviews with 64 street artists and snapshots of various street artworks. Her use of interview excerpts and decision to insert a short 'encounter' with a street artist or street artwork between each of the six chapters makes her book feel conversational, causing the reader to feel she is part of a community, somehow connected to a larger world through this two-dimensional thing in her hands. In this way, I find Young's writing performative: engaging, representing and including multiple voices in hopes of fostering connected, democratic communities (see Pelias 2005, 418).

Young's writing style reveals that she is not only a legal scholar but a writer, someone regularly searching for meaning in the world around her. How am I so convinced? She dared to write 'love' on the first page of the text as she shared her first memory of graffiti. It was painted on a wall next to the train line in her home town, Paisley:

MY DARLING FLOPS
I LOVE YOU

When I asked my Australian friend, Anita, what a flop is, she said it is slang for 'failure' but that 'flops' is probably a nickname referring to a specific person. Either

way, I'd been offered an honest glance into a meaningful moment of Young's life, one that marked the beginning of a 20-year journey researching and finding beauty in street art. Autobiographical moments like this are scarce in legal scholarship despite the richness they offer, a transparency that allows a reader to see an author's position, initial connections and potential motivations in relation to her research interest.

Young argues that our responses to 'street artwork are crucially important in determining whether our urban centres can ever be(come) *public cities*' (2014, 3). Rather than reconciling competing views of whether street artists impose their works on spectators by adopting an 'autocratic' approach towards other people's property, she explores 'how public space demands a discourse of democracy when debating the issue of entitlement to make images within it' (Ibid., 28), offering opinions from the 64 artists, a wide array of scholars and her own research in New York, Paris, Melbourne, London, Berlin and Rome. To assist the reader, she offers robust discussions of what constitutes a city, what informs street art, and how law interacts with cities, street art and street artists. She does so while integrating themes of belonging, transformation and reclamation of the city, carefully unpacking how law's boundaries of authorization and permissibility criminalize graffiti and street art and how street art, by rejecting law's notions of property, facilitates embodying other possibilities and modes of legality.

The hallmark of Young's book is that the subjects are not reduced to arguments or abstractions. Young manages to keep the complexities of human experience, law, street artwork and the city intact, describing the ache that results from the loss of a piece of street art, the surprise when a new piece appears, the fear that arises when a citizen assumes policing responsibility to stop an artwork's creation (sometimes violently), the theories governments use to justify criminal and behavioural offences targeting street artwork, and the multiple ways cities are walked in, lived in, shaped and perceived. She tells a story of human experience and transformative interactions while exposing how legal systems are constructed by partial and partisan representations (see Pelias 2005, 418).

Young explicitly chooses, however, not to use 'conventional demographic attributes about age, gender, class and so on' in describing the artists, instead 'allow[ing] their identities to be read through their recounted histories, experiences and desires' (Young 2014, 24). While she considers class through the impacts of neighbourhood gentrification and street art's commodification, the absence of an analysis of race and gender in relation to the history, criminalization and practice of street art left me unsettled. I could not help but notice that the three artists featured in the five encounters were all men: Banksy, JR and Brad Downey. Where are women in the world of street art? Are the encounters a reflection of the artistic practice? I also couldn't help but wonder whether these three featured street artists are white (only aware that they are of English, French and American citizenship) and what race means in relation to fame and state violence as a street artist: who is able to safely pass through police encounters and continue making street art? Do people of colour, indigenous peoples and non-status individuals face greater challenges

and higher stakes, such that their voices are less present? To discuss criminalization and specific police encounters without discussing race, particularly in cities such as New York, concerns me as it allows readers to believe differential treatment does not exist, silently erasing histories of state violence against particular groups. Sensitive to the challenges a legal scholar must face in establishing rapport and access to people making 'illegal' artwork, I applaud Young's dedication to collecting the interviews—a hard-sought collection of data—and understand the cautions one must exercise in how that data is used in scholarship, especially when she is not an insider to a community. Yet the absence of an explicit or even embedded critical race and feminist analysis in a text that inspires reimagining the city as a place of transformation and democratic belonging is hard for me to reconcile with my deep respect and appreciation of the structure, content and arguments in her book.

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Before moving on, it may be helpful to attempt clarifying what 'street art' refers to and what sort of motivations inform it. Young offers broad reaching, well-researched and innovative understandings of the term. Despite avoiding conventional demographics in her interview process, Young acknowledges that street art is 'a culture in itself, with hierarchies, conventions, forms of inclusions and exclusion' (2014, 25). She notes that the term street art gained popularity in the early to mid-2000s and is therefore distinct from graffiti, which has a longer established history, though it still flows from the historical practices of graffiti writing, political protest (slogans and posters), punk culture, and situationist art (Ibid., 4-5).

More literally, street art consists of images, objects and/or words in public spaces. Genres of street artwork include: tags (a graffiti signature of sorts), stencil art (images painted from stencils), paste-up art (sheets of paper pasted to walls with a flour-based adhesive), stickers (self-explanatory), and objects (addition of new objects to an existing space or surface, or alteration of existing things). Some consider it art, law considers it a crime. It should not be conflated with urban art and cannot be reduced to a singular definition or exhaustive list of characteristics.

Young considers street art 'situational art' because its placement is political, informing the spectator's encounter with the work, the artist's choice of location and the law's desire to deem it legal or illegal (Young 2014, 8). Street art is thus 'an uncommissioned, un-author(is)ed work, visible in public space and located on private property' (Ibid., 34). Its makers are unknown, unpaid and generally do not ask permission to transform the space they use. For this reason, some scholars call it 'transgressive behaviour' while others analyse it as a 'communicative practice' or 'unauthorized intervention' (Ibid., 4, 6, 27, 2). More positive descriptions include 'an unsolicited aesthetic injection' (Riggle 2010, 249), a gift, an alternate or alternative news source (in contrast to billboards and mainstream advertising) (Young 2014, 19). Street artists tended to mention illegality, aesthetics, and impact on urban space when describing their work. Having said all that, you must negotiate and define your own relationship to street art, a contextual one that will inevitably draw on your

political beliefs, especially regarding property.

Gilles Deleuze frames all forms of art as performative gestures that invite people to come forth. Rather than representing an audience, artwork appeals to people who didn't previously exist or existed differently (Deleuze 1997). In this way, street artwork is constitutive: spectators view it, curiosity develops and relationships to the street and one another change (Riggle 2010, 249). Young invites readers to follow Michel de Certeau's idea that the paths walked in a city are 'unrecognized poems in which [your] body is an element signed by many others' (Certeau 1984, 93), so that walking in the city becomes a constitutive act where 'citizenship arises, and varies, as we traverse' (Young 2014, 90). In this same vein, many of the street artists interviewed said their work is about revitalising a sense of belonging in urban space: 'it shows people that the city is theirs. They need to see and question the objects that they engage with every day'.¹ Street artwork is thus a powerful tool for affecting a sense of belonging in the city.

In her thought-provoking chapter on cityscapes, where Young discusses how street art impacts the identity of six Western cities (New York, Paris, Melbourne, London, Berlin and Rome), a consideration of how histories of colonization factor into notions of belonging, particularly in cities occupied by settler societies such as New York and Melbourne, would have strengthened the discussion. While Young mentions that Aboriginal politics were part of Melbourne's graffiti writing movement in the 1990s, I can't help but wonder who is 'reclaiming' the city now? Who thinks the city is theirs to take back, and from whom are they taking it? Whose 'desire to represent things otherwise, to change the way citizens experience cities and property' are now being shared, and what 'multiplicities' are street artworks pointing towards 'within the singular city' (Young 2014, 53)?

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Young's book has inspired me to revisit my relationship to street art and see the city I live in through new eyes—to notice love notes dried in cement sidewalks, the almost invisible graffiti layered onto a Canada Post box (designed to deter graffiti by virtue of already being covered in writing—postal codes in various fonts and sizes—from top to bottom). In these moments, I embody what she writes, realizing how street art lifts spectators into aesthetically striking moments where they may become enchanted. Whether this enchantment offers fear and dislike or pleasure and delight, it is a space of pause and meaning-making² where all interpretations are valid³. The artwork's 'performance of criminality, contestation and creativity' (2014, 59) not only engages the spectator's urban imagination but asks her to consider what does and does not belong and why. Indeed, by taking the familiar and making it strange, street artwork becomes performative and transformative, materially, situationally and imaginatively altering the cityscape, opening space for disruption

1 Brad Downey, cited in Young 2014, 54.

2 See Bennett 2001; see Young 2014, 45-46.

3 Kaffeine, cited in Young 2014, 25.

and destabilization, for re-imagining how we conceive property.

You may be familiar with law's classifications of street art and graffiti as crimes, vandalism, property damage and trespass but did you know Britain handed down Antisocial Behaviour Orders to individuals caught making graffiti under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and subsequent Antisocial Behaviour Act 2003 (Young 2014, 113)? Australia even augmented police powers so that officers could search without a warrant. To create new offenses in relation to street artwork and graffiti, many governments relied on the broken windows theory which speculatively muses that the presence of any social disorder encourages further disorder because it suggests crime is not regulated (Ibid., 109). Amongst this theory's many flaws, it disregards the motivations behind and consequences of graffiti: a broken window destroys the functionality of the window whereas graffiti does not destroy the functionality of the wall, but changes its appearance 'add[ing] a layer of meaning' (Ibid., 110).

Having established that street art draws meaning from its location in public space on private property, Young investigates why graffiti and street art make the law so anxious. In simple terms, law fears street artwork's rejection of boundaries and authority—its rejection of property. Where law orders, drawing lines so that the city appears smooth, organized and functional, street artwork exposes 'multiple boundaries and borders of the propertied cityscape', serving as a 'de-territorialising tactic', an *autopoietic* practice refusing to be designated to a particular space (Ibid., 145). These rejections are criminalised in order to reinforce notions of ownership, boundaries, authority and property.

Young's next question is rather profound, requiring the reader to dismantle and re-envision their understanding of the legal system: why do governments use criminal law to deal with artwork that is, by law's own structures, an offence to property? Having already described law's relationship to the city, Young slowly reveals the structures and systems barring our imaginations before offering us alternatives: why not create statutes empowering property owners to utilize procedures under administrative or property law to assert rights over their property rather than criminal statutes (Young 2014, 114)?

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Some scholars say ephemerality and material or artistic use of the street are essential to street art (Riggle 2010). I am left wondering what it means to record street art in a scholarly book, to document, archive and historicize a practice that is otherwise ephemeral and tends to pass knowledge through image, object and presence. Although street art is frequently documented online, I wonder what it means to translate the practice and the words of its practitioners into a book and add them to the legal archive. Repertoire, as described by Diane Taylor in relation to performance, requires presence, for people to participate in the spectatorship. The performance doesn't subsequently disappear but is generated, recorded and transmitted through bodies orally and through further performances and iterations, thus exceeding the archive's ability to capture it as a frozen moment in time (see Taylor 2003, 20). I

am happy to have this book, to have read it, to have learned from it—indeed, I am a lover of the written word—yet I am wary of the archive’s potential to validate, institutionalize, co-opt and transform ephemeral practices.

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I don't think that the answer to all our problems is gonna be one book, yeah? But I do think the answers to all our problems are gonna be found in the creative...

– Junot Diaz (2010)

You can now see how difficult it is to define the cultural practice of street art, how it ‘can be art *and* crime *and* an aspect of urban space *and* a form of communication *and* a political gesture *and* constitutive of a new movement in art’ (Young 2014, 8). If you don’t like street art or you consider graffiti to be vandalism, Young’s book will challenge your assumptions or perhaps let you see the cities you live in differently. If you love street art, you will learn about the methods, come across a brief recent history, the attempts to control it and feel like you’ve been in conversation with a global community of artists in a way you haven’t before. If you are a street artist, it’s good to see what people are writing and saying about you but you may also learn some risk minimization and community building techniques (Ibid., 106). If you are a lawyer or scholar, you will be offered new ways of understanding law’s relationship to street art and might question why street art is governed under the criminal regime. No matter who you are, I believe this book will lead you to see the city differently, to walk through familiar places with new lenses—even if there isn’t street art in your town, you may start seeing the potential for it, places where it could live or places where the city is trying to prevent it from living.

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