REVIEW ARTICLE

Attachments to Inhospitable Places

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Gordon Young (2013). *Teardown: Memoir of a Vanishing City*. Berkeley, California. University of California Press. Hardcover ISBN: 9780520270527 | 288 pages; Ebook ISBN: 9780520955370

and

Isabelle Anguelovski (2014). *Neighborhood as Refuge: Community Reconstruction, Place Remaking, and Environment Justice in the City*.. MIT Press.
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When I agreed to review both Gordon Young's *Teardown* and *Neighborhood as Refuge* by Isabelle Anguelovski I did not anticipate they would provide me an opportunity to compare how journalists and social scientists report on similar subjects. In this case it was depressed urban neighborhoods occupied by variously stigmatized groups. At first glance the books appeared incompatible, but a closer look revealed much about the two historically and logically related professions, as well as the life worlds of people struggling to make a home in inhospitable places. Therefore, in the review essay I will supplement conventional reviews with additional commentary.

As a teaser, if not a provocation, the 'Telling Notes from Reviews' for *Teardown* pointedly refers to the social sciences.

'Perfect for: The amateur urbanist who wants to go to Flint without actually having to leave the backyard.'
(Alexander Nazaryan *Atlantic Wire* 2013-06-12)

'While scholars and urban planners throughout the US and Europe debate strategies for revitalising former industrial cities that are 'shrinking', 'forgotten' or 'failing', Young reminds us that storytelling, including the kind of inconclusive ending we might find in a contemporary novel, sometimes reveals more than the most careful study can. Better yet, a good story shows us why we should care, even if it doesn't provide any solutions.'
(Sherry Lee Linkon *Times Higher Education* 2013-10-31)

Max Weber (1947) argued that human society is made possible when social actors can imagine themselves in the place of the others with whom they interact and thereby correctly

anticipate the others' behaviour. The job for us is not only coming to an 'understanding' (*verstehen*) of this through empirical research, but equally important, conveying our newly gained knowledge to others; for example professional peers, students and in some cases the general public. The German verbs *kennen* and *wissen* also inform us about Weber's Neo-Kantian sociological understanding (Rutgers and Shreurs 2006). *Wissen* is factual knowing while *kennen* has to do with acquaintance with and working knowledge of something.

Each of these books did the job of 'knowing' about the subject well, but they did so in different ways. Journalists like Gordon Young lean toward *kennen* and social scientists like Isabelle Anguelovski lean toward *wissen*. However both kinds of knowledge are necessary to get the best, complete, picture. At the other end of the collection of knowledge is conveying it to readers or audiences. Since journalists and social scientists have different audiences, the way that they present their knowledge also differs. These volumes remind us of these constraints in that the central subject of each is the same. The audiences can be placed along a spectrum from academic urban scholars on the one end and the general public on the other. *Refuge* clearly falls on the academic scholar side and *Teardown* on the other, but they share some territory with urban planners, politicians, activists and concerned publics in the centre. There are also questions about how useful their findings are to their readers.

Both authors claim to want to influence powerful decision makers while also providing tools for those less empowered. For example, they agree that the greening of urban spaces, environmentalism and sustainability are valuable methods for improving the urban condition, especially in depressed communities and for stigmatized groups. In this regard in *Refuge* Anguelovski draws a wider and more detailed picture providing detailed discussions of theories and methods as well as some thick description. Young's *Teardown* skimps on those aspects but better conveys to the reader what life is like on the ground in a struggling urban neighbourhood. Like ethnographers, journalists make you feel closer to the subject and the simple, jargon-free, language allows for reflection on one's own experiences.

Reading *Neighborhood as Refuge* led me to reflect on my own, similar, scholarship. As an activist scholar *Teardown* also appealed to me in a special, personal, way. Although there are many concepts, incidents and concerns that tie these books together at the intellectual level, it is the degree of 'attachment to place' that best connects the two and also to my own work.

In this regard I was especially drawn to the comments of Travis Watson from the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) who explained:

> 'I really feel like the sense of community. I feel like people kind of look out for each other. You see a lot of people that are helping the elderly off the bus, I feel like it's some of the little things I can kind of pick up in this community. I just like the vibe. I like just walking down the streets and kind of just talking to people. People are very real here.' (134).

On the first day of his return to Flint in search of a perfect $3,000 house, Gordon Young, called his wife and:

'I tried to explain how one day in Flint contrasted with the cold, superficial friendliness of San Francisco, where I sometimes felt like I could go long stretches without making a real connection with anyone besides her. I'd already been fretted over by Berniece; confronted, scrutinized and ultimately accepted by Rebecca and Nathan; embraced by Rich's mom; and called a *muthafucka* by the birthday boy. It was all a visceral reminder that the anonymity of big-city life in San Francisco and the stereotypical laid-back character of California had their drawbacks. …At the risk of sounding like a touchy-feely Californian, somehow Flint felt more real, like I had permanent ties here that I could never make in San Francisco.' (12)

In my own work on similarly stigmatized inner-city Brooklyn neighbourhoods in the 1970s, local activists expressed similar sentiments of place attachment. In my case the stigma was racial.

'The first time I was there it looked like a community, because it was a mixture and you could see the beautification, the scenery. The people seemed to be getting along fine. They were friendly. They were sitting outside and when you passed they said 'Hello.' You could see the families . . .' (Krase 1982: 173, See also 1977, 1979)

In my opinion, *Neighborhood as Refuge: Community Reconstruction, Place Remaking, and Environment Justice in the City* is the kind of 'applicable' work in which more scholars ought to be engaged. The author, Isabelle Anguelovski, holds the position of Marie Curie Fellow and Senior Researcher at the Institute for Environmental Science and Technology at the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*. In her informed estimation, environmental justice requires that 'every person, regardless of race, income, culture, and gender has the right to a decent quality of life' (35) in safe places 'to live, work, play and learn.' (219). In other words, 'environmental justice' is not limited to the amelioration of such physical issues as bad air and water quality, but also requires human rights and gender equality. This idea, or better ideology, to which I also ascribe, provides the foundation for this cross-national, comparative work.

Anguelovski successfully demonstrates in this well-written and carefully documented volume how a broad spectrum of academic research methods and theories can contribute to the efforts of activists in obtaining environmental justice for the poor and members of minority groups. To accomplish this imposing task she carefully describes, discusses and gives many detailed examples of people who live in depressed areas in cities on two different continents as well as an island nation, and easily by extension, throughout the world. These sites and subjects are in the Casc Antic neighbourhood of Barcelona, Spain, the Dudley neighbourhood of Roxbury in Boston, Massachusetts (U.S.A.) and in Havana, Cuba, the neighbourhood of Cayo Hueso.

Through a synthesis of her three in-depth case studies of local activists the author develops a theory of, and hopefully thereby a method for obtaining, environmental justice for those living in deprived urban neighbourhoods. It must be noted that the range of social,

economic, and political systems in which these neighbourhoods are found increases the value of her reasoning. In the course of the research a wide variety of methods and techniques were employed to compose the most comprehensive, and therefore the most useful, picture. In the field, she employed the usual tool bag of urban ethnography such as interviews with leaders, residents, community workers, nongovernmental organizations, foundations, planners and decision makers; observations, as well as participant observations. She also collected and analyzed relevant documents such as reports, newspaper articles, planning documents and other materials gathered in the course of the study to provide the most comprehensive view.

From these data, Anguelovski was able to describe in detail the work of local activists, who by her treatment in the book essentially become exemplars for emulation. Slowly, over the course of at least two decades in each of these three venues they were able to overcome substantial obstacles to improve the environmental conditions and in the process transform these otherwise stigmatized areas. They did this by working together to build (sometimes unlikely) coalitions, partnerships and networks to blend environmental justice action with community development.

> 'These projects included urban farms, community, gardens, famers' markets, parks, playgrounds, small green spaces, sports grounds, community centers, healthy homes and improved waste management that were built thanks to bottom-to-bottom networks. For over two decades, activists in Boston, Barcelona and Havana have worked to improve the environmental quality and livability of their neighborhoods through projects that have transformed socioenvironmental conditions, rebuilt, broken communities, and remade places for residents' (219).

Although these neighbourhoods had much in common, such as low-income and minority residents located in the centre of major cities, at other levels they had many significant differences such as local, regional and national political and economic systems. The key to the success in all places were local residents who had strong allegiance to their homes and neighbours and who were willing to commit themselves to extensive activism for the sake of their neighbourhood. Why similar committed activists were successful here and not elsewhere is left unanswered such as why those who are able to leave stay behind to join or lead the struggle. Like the activists I have studied and worked with over the decades, those described in *Neighborhood as Refuge* also understood, resisted and challenged their imposed marginality. They rejected how they were defined by official and unofficial agencies that sought to determine their future. They also fought '… existing racist and classist stigmas and stereotypes about low-income and minority residents – especially that they live in worthless neighbourhoods and do not care about the long-term well-being and environmental quality of their place' (27).

There is much more that can be said about *Neighborhood as Refuge: Community Reconstruction, Place Remaking, and Environment Justice in the City* by Isabelle Anguelovski. My only regret is that each of her three cases was not provided in separate volumes where so much more of her carefully assembled detail, and for urban ethnographers, the close-up descriptive work would be more fully displayed. I assume there is much more to

come from these projects and I look forward to it. I was a bit disappointed that urban ethnography and especially the work of urban anthropologists was not directly engaged. My sense is that its theoretical and methodological contributions have been subsumed by the 'interdisciplines' that dominate the interdisciplinary field of 'Environmental Studies' itself. In this regard I complete this review with the 'telling' quote below.

> 'Researchers in sociology, planning, geography and environmental psychology have examined and theorized about place in cities. In this book I offer a glimpse into this vase and multidisciplinary scholarship and concentrate on how previous studies help us to understand the relationships among place attachment, sense of community, and participation in urban neighborhoods, especially historically disenfranchised neighborhood.' (47)

Gordon Young, senior lecturer in the Communication Department at Santa Clara University, is also a journalist who has published *The New York Times*, *Slate*, and the *Utne Reader*. He grew up in Flint, Michigan, once celebrated as the birthplace of General Motors and now lamented as its resting place. The litany of the once proud city's ills include the loss of half its highest population of 200,000, an official 30 per cent unemployment rate and about ten square miles of empty houses, buildings and vacant lots. He aptly summarized the situation with a quote from someone he met in a bar there: 'This place is fucked up, man.'

Although he left his beloved hometown, he maintained a virtual connection through a blog *Flint Expatriates* for former residents like himself. The mainly first person narrative text revolves around his quixotic search for a house he could buy (for a mere 3,000 US dollars) in Flint and restore to its prior comfort, if not lost grandeur. One method was searching for ultra-cheap houses on *e-Bay*. During his three-year pilgrimage, he visits and revisits the place where he grew up and in the process finds many courageous people to be admired as well many others to be ashamed of. Arson for profit or eliminating local drug dens is contrasted with planned and spontaneous reforestation projects. Courageous urban homesteaders and pioneers find they are at the mercy of real-estate speculators, politicians and planners who have their own ideas for the future of their city. Two of these visions are shrinking the city and relatedly greening a smaller Flint to create a global model for sustainable urban environments.

These machinations and tribulations are marvellously captured in twenty-seven chapters five to ten pages in length with titles that, unlike text books, actually tell the whole story: Pink Houses and Panhandlers, Bottom-Feeders, Bourgeois Homeowners, Virtual Vehicle City, Bad Reputation, The Road to Prosperity, Bar Logic, Downward Mobility, Black and White, The Forest Primeval, The Naked Truth, The Toughest Job in Politics, Urban Homesteaders, Quitters Never Win, Burning Down the House, Emotional Rescue, Get Real, Living Large, Fading Murals, Gun Club, Bargaining with God, Psycho Killer, Winter Wonderland, Home on the Range, California Dreamin', Thankless Task, and Joy to the World.

Ultimately, Young realizes (in my words) that he could not go home again because that home no longer existed beyond his mind. It comes on the last day of his final visit when there was a heavy snow that helped 'to mask all the decay.' His friend Aaron was shovelling and

remarked 'I don't think I could ever give this up.' Young writes that he understood exactly what Aaron felt.

> 'A part of me had never left Flint. At the same time, I couldn't deny that there was a large dose of relief in knowing that I was about to walk away. I had a fulfilling life in San Francisco, and another part of me couldn't wait to return. Yet again, Flint was forcing me to deal with two contradictory emotions. I should have been used to it by now. I knew I was doing the right thing, but I couldn't help feeling that I was abandoning the place that made me who I am.' (235)

I must admit that I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Teardown: Memoir of a Vanishing City.* It is difficult if not impossible for academics to find humour even in funny situations. Unlike academics, journalists feel the need to keep their readers happy as opposed to being impressed by their eruditeness. Therefore Gordon Young had the license to find the lighter side of urban life in some of the most difficult, and dangerous places.

> 'One of the most unexpected fringe benefits of Flint's decline is that you seldom have to wait for anything. Traffic jams are rare. Service at bars and restaurants is generally brisk, given that there are few customers and the wait staff really need the money. But that pattern was broken at Advanced Ranges on Center Road, just across Flint's eastern border in Burton. On a punishing cold afternoon, there was a forty-five minute wait. (Note to would-be flint entrepreneurs: Guns!)' (205)

Unlike an academic treatise, Gordon Young's *Teardown* provides no suggestions for solving the problems of Flint but he clearly shows what doesn't work and what can be hoped for. The book also reminded me of my own attachments to the places in which I grew up. The depressed, and depressing, condition of Flint, Michigan had many similarities to the working class neighborhoods of Brooklyn when they suffered the same disinvestment and deindustrialization. In *Self and Community in the City* (1982) I wrote about how our sense of self, and the groups to which we belong, are very much tied to the territories we inhabit and move through. *Teardown* is a study of allegiance to a place and helps is to understand the power of attachment to place, even though that sentiment is clearly irrational and potentially detrimental to our well-being.

The book contains extensive notes but not the type associated with academic studies as well as a limited but useful collection of sources and Further Reading. These limited 'back matters' are understandable in that the book makes not pretensions as a guide for urban social scientists to replicate or to test. I would recommend *Teardown* for a wide variety of general readers, such as those interested in a close and sympathetic view of the lives of people in struggling cities, as well as a supplement to undergraduate courses in urban sociology, anthropology and related offerings. It is also suitable for advanced courses but more a document to be analysed as primarily source material. Social scientists and many urban-focused professionals such as urban planners would also benefit from this personal memoir that in many ways mimics auto-ethnographic accounts of similar subjects and settings. If he

were a social scientist, I would describe his approach as multi-methodological as it integrates city history, observations, as well as references to printed and on-line texts.

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