Alison Young, *Imagining Crime, Textual Outlaws and Criminal Conversations*

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Crime and representation are very new and exciting areas of analysis in criminology. This text makes a substantial, new and intellectually sophisticated contribution to the existing body of literature, in both its empirical richness and theoretical complexity. The book offers an innovative and provocative analysis of the power effects of textual representation of crime (later referred to in the text as the 'will to watch'). Alison Young, the author, suggests that crime acts as a potent sign — of disease, threat and evil — and symbolically as a unifier of an imaginary citizenship (pp54–55). The criminal acts a signifier for the textual outlaw in an imaginary community whereby everyone is constituted (in discourse) as a vicarious victim of crime (pp8–10).

The concept of the textual outlaw developed here is different to the Durkheimian concept whereby punishment of the offender (rule-breaker) restores equilibrium to the *conscience collective*. Textual outlaws must be expelled to restore harmony to some imaginary community (p11). As Young explains:

> The symbolically sacrificed outlaw is thus a victim of our desire for community (though shared victimization) ... Outlaws who commit crime generate a sense of commonality... where victimization is posited as a communal experienc ... A community is founded upon victimization and victimization constitutes the necessary entry subscription. The community that results is, of course, a simulacrum of a community; a phantasm that speaks of a nostalgic desire for oneness and unity, ... Thus modernist criminal justice offers an impoverished, pale version of community, which mimics the recognition of the yearned-for pre-modern community. Recognition is not based upon friendship, but upon the awareness of risk and danger (pp9–10).

Young is right, crime is no doubt a potent signifier — in which we (the imaginary community) constitute ourselves vicariously as victims. The wave of public outrage over the bashing murder of British tourist, Brian Hagland at Bondi Beach (7 September 1996) is a local example of how such events create a spectacle of imaginary citizenship.[1] In much of the media coverage Bondi, the community, is actually represented as the victim under the banner headlines 'How *Bondi* lost its innocence'; 'Death in *Bondi*'; 'Police Believe they Know *Bondi Killers*', '*As Bondi Grieves*, a man steps forward'. Bondi, the community, is even elevated to possessing the human ability to grieve. The collective conscience of Bondi residents poured onto the radio talk-back shows to lament the commission of this crime in their neighbourhood. The crime is as much the adverse international visibility attracted to Bondi as the bashing of a tourist. Crimes like these certainly invoke the criminal as the textual outlaw and every member of the community as a victim of one kind or another.

The first two chapters delineate the theoretical grounding for the substantive chapters which apply these novel theoretical insights. Chapter 2 specifically addresses the enigmatic

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1 'Death in Bondi', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 1996; 'Police Believe they know Bondi Killers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 1996; 'As Bondi grieves, a man steps forward'; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 1996; 'Last moments of Brian Hagland'; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1996; 'How Bondi Lost Its Innocence'; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 1996.

symbol of femininity represented in criminological discourses. It identifies *the limits* of criminology's ability to represent sexual difference, and makes a powerful argument for the value of feminism to the analysis of crime and its representation. Chapter 3 analyses how the representation of criminal victimisation acts as a means for constituting a sensibility of belonging to an imaginary citizenship and of establishing the boundaries around that social body. Chapter 4 analyses the aesthetic representation of crime in detective fiction genres. Chapter 5, discussed in further detail below, analyses the abduction and murder of two year old James Bulger, as a case study demonstrating the limit of representation. Chapter 6 deconstructs the representation of the domestic space of the single mother as a site of criminogenesis. Chapter 7, once again explores the major theme of the book, the tensions between the visible and invisible, analysing the representation (framing) of HIV/AIDS, juxtaposing the spectacle of HIV/AIDS in photography with the crimino-legal complex. The methodology of this text is distinctly genealogical in that it starts with a series of events — the death of a women during deportation, the murder of a child by two others, an image of a man dying of AIDS. The analysis then proceeds to trace the complex impact of the technologisation of these events through their imagining and representation in public discourse. The book traces how the specific events invoke a vast and complex range of responses — most notably the will to watch — to participate in the collective imagination of the invisible.

At the risk of doing this intellectually sophisticated text some injustice, I shall attempt to briefly recount Young's riveting analysis of the events that surrounded the murder of James Bulger by Jon Venables and Robert Thompson on 12 February 1993. This event, its recording on security camera, and its global re-representation thereafter through the technologisation of the image provides the occasion for the author to make a number of original and theoretically sophisticated arguments about the representation of crimes such as these, particularly focusing on the tensions between the seen and the unseen, the visible and invisible, the imaginable and the unimaginable and a whole host of dichotomous configurations of child/ non-child; mother/child; maternal archetype/maternal Other.

James Bulger, the two year old victim, is represented as the child. His assailants are represented as non-child like (pp113–117). The mother of the victim, Denise Bulger is represented as the responsible mother — the maternal archetype — who turned her gaze away from her child for just a second while shopping (p118). In that second of invisibility a hideous crime occurs — her child is abducted, later found brutally murdered on a railway line. The public representations of this crime exhort an imaginary community of mothers to vicariously identify with this mother/victim. All good mothers are represented as having been victimised by this crime. The absent mothers of the two assailants are represented as 'irrecoverably alien' (p120) and as embodying 'maternity as Other' (p125). They are the textual outlaws of motherhood. Their sons who committed this crime are the textual outlaws of childhood.

The abduction of James Bulger was captured on security camera. One of the many fascinating arguments developed in this text is that the security camera creates a false sense of security — it is an absent-present, like answering machines, e-mail and other kinds of virtual realities. But no-one is watching. Its images may never be watched — or watched maybe months later in courts. The security camera functions primarily as an extra-juridical recording device — its captured images providing a body of evidentiary material in cases, and trials many months later. The Bulger case is an excellent, and exceptional example of this, as the author points out. On this point perhaps one might add to the analysis some interesting parallels and differences with panopticonism. While the panopticon creates the illusion of constantly being watched — the strategic effect of the security camera is that it creates the illusion of *not* being watched while being imaged, imprinted (finger printing

on a grander scale if you like). Both the panopticon and the security camera operate through the creation of illusion, the deployment of impersonal and technical means to connect the practices of the self with governmental projects of various kinds — the former as an architectural device and the latter as a part of that super-highway of information technologies increasingly familiar in the contemporary west. While the panopticon was an instrument of disciplinary technology, the gaze of the security camera is, as the author suggests, the eyes of the law. It operates as a device which crisscrosses the sites of governmental and sovereign power, in that it connects the seeing (knowledge) of the population — in this case the isles of desire (shopping centres) — with the sovereign site of law.

When the technology of the image traverses these domains of government (the popular to the sovereign), it enters a different epistome. The image recorded by the security camera takes on an elevated status as truth. Yet, what the brilliant analysis of this book demonstrates, is how those images are never fixed in meaning or content, but inherently limited. Few of us need convincing that what gets counted as a legal truth entails a highly active filtering process, one which has the benefit of hindsight in addition to all sorts of other privileges. In the popular domain the image of three boys looked like a family — not a crime. After eight months of circulation of the discourses of blame between the popular and the sovereign, it was the image of an unthinkable abduction and murder. As Young points out, the limit of representation has been reached. It 'ends when three boys climb the embankment to the railway line. The crime that is then committed is unrepresentable, unimaginable, unthinkable. The event exceeds the limits of representation and as such represents the border of what can be imagined'(p137). We (the imaginary community) are asked to feast our eyes on the invisible, we are exhorted to imagine the unimaginable — how two boys could have killed an infant (p212).

I am anxious that my short review of this fascinating book does it a great injustice. It is a book which makes a significant contribution to a new and courageous kind of feminist engagement within the criminological enterprise. It uses feminist theory and analysis — subtly but powerfully — to breach the limits of the crimino-legal complex. It engages in a sustained set of analyses of concrete events and issues but nevertheless maintains the coherency of the central themes around the limits of representation. Significantly this text does not privilege any body of scholarship. It draws upon a rich scholarship from traditional criminological thinking, to textual studies, post-modernism and beyond. Alison Young's book constructs no dogmas, forces no closures and makes only the most *humble* of knowledge claims — that her work represents a series of conversations. It is simply the best book I have read, written from the genre of feminist writing about crime and criminology. You just have to read it yourself.

Kerry Carrington
School of Humanities, University of Western Sydney