Book Review: *Owning the street: The everyday life of property* by Amelia Thorpe

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*Owning the street: The everyday life of property* by Amelia Thorpe is a thorough, thoughtful, and nuanced study of PARK(ing) Day – its histories, various manifestations, and its entanglements with other tactical urbanist practices, strategies, and philosophies. Above all, Thorpe explores what PARK(ing) Day can teach us about property; what property is, how it is understood legally, discursively, culturally, and how it is expressed and enacted through everyday practices, claims, assertions, and relations of power.

*Owning the street* offers a definitive history of PARK(ing) Day, one that corrects some commonly storied myths. Thorpe traces the premise of PARK(ing) Day – that is, paying a parking meter to do something with a parking space other than park a car – as far back as the 1930s (see chapter 1). This kind of playful interpretation/subversion seems to be as old as parking meters themselves. Based on PARK(ing) Day practices in Sydney, San Francisco and Montreal, and drawing from interviews, observation, images and videos, traditional media and social media, blogs and fora, Thorpe parses and critiques property and property rights, law and enforcement, ownership and sense of ownership through the lens PARK(ing) Day provides. This is a compelling account of how property is understood, enacted, negotiated, contested and reconstituted through everyday beliefs and practices, particularly among relatively privileged, urban, middle-class, professional and/or creative classes (there are modes of understanding and interacting with urban property absent from this account, because those who hold them are generally not participating in PARK(ing) Day).

A conceit at the heart of PARK(ing) Day, and one that Thorpe interrogates, is the presumed legality of such interventions (see chapter 3). By paying the parking meter, participants generally believe they have established a kind of property right (usually framed as
a lease) over the space to do with as they will. Through her histories and case studies, Thorpe shows how contingent this property right, and the legality of these interventions, really are. In many instances these legal assumptions are not tested, with PARK(ing) Day participants not coming into contact with regulatory bodies or law enforcement at all. But Thorpe is concerned with a more interesting question than the technicalities of the law – rather she explores the political work being done in claiming that a legitimate property right exists, confidently (often collectively) exerting that property right, and how that may shape urban space. The story commonly told about PARK(ing) Day's exploitation of a kind of legal loophole – whether correct or not – enables a set of diverse place-making practices, united by little else than a shared desire to temporarily reclaim some of the space usually surrendered to the exclusive use of cars. This story is a core part of why many participants feel comfortable getting involved; PARK(ing) Day participants often distinguish themselves from more antagonistic claimants on and transformers of public space. Thorpe finds that many participants in PARK(ing) Day demonstrated and expressed complex and pluralistic – even collective and affective – understandings of ownership (see chapters 4 and 5). But Thorpe does not leave it there, and carefully reminds us that property is not reducible to those feelings; state power must be contended with.

The relational and contingent ways that law and property are practised are made visible in Thorpe's case studies. This is a key tension underpinning PARK(ing) Day, and one Thorpe keeps circling back to; what is the potential of such actions to transform public space, when they draw on, and perhaps reinforce, the systems of property, ownership, and legality that have produced modern (settler-colonial) cities as we know them? Who gets to participate in property and place-making through the use of performative, playful, contingently permitted, tactical urbanist strategies? Whose affirmations and claims of property, belonging, and urban space,
are taken at face value? And whose are disbelieved, regardless of the correctness, and justness, of their claims?

The central case studies in this text – Montreal, San Francisco, and Sydney – are all settler-colonial cities, and the constitution of property in these places co-constitutes with colonial theft and dispossession. Gentrification can be understood as a contemporary expression, or extension, of the dispossession of First Nations Peoples (Latimore, 2018). PARK(ing) Day, as a movement, is overwhelmingly middle class, dominated by professional/creative class workers, who are often white. Thorpe found no involvement of First Nations People in PARK(ing) Day events (see chapter 6); a troubling absence in any progressive movement, but especially one centred on making claims of, over, and for public space in settler-colonial cities. While some participants use PARK(ing) Day to make clear connections to other issues of spatial politics and social justice, and use the opportunity to expand the public sphere (Thorpe describes one organisation, CC Puede, who used PARK(ing) Day to provide ‘health checks and food for migrant day labourers’ [p. 37]), providing space and care for those often excluded from public life, but who often spend time in public space as they seek work), most are far less explicit in their politics, and some seem little more than corporate branding activities. Thorpe argues early on that PARK(ing) Day invokes and sustains property and property law; as such, can it disrupt settler-colonial notions of property and law, or merely reinscribe them in different formations? Thorpe provides us with data and analysis to consider these questions, but she resists making any kind of didactic instruction on what to make of it all.

This is a book for urban planners, for those interested in property as both a legal and cultural artefact, for urban historians, and tactical urbanists. Thorpe achieves her goal of illuminating cracks, fissures, and contradictions in dominant understandings of property, space, and belonging, while also troubling PARK(ing) Day – not reifying it, acknowledging both what
we can learn from its history and practices and from how it conforms and excludes, and how it can become separate from transformative demands marginalised people may make for or of space. Thorpe's account of PARK(ing) Day illuminates tensions in how property is understood and enacted in capitalist cities, and how some DiY/tactical urbanist interventions can become acceptable disruptions.

Reference List
