Street Art of Barcelona: observations, interpretations and reflections

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Abstract. The original intention for this project was to research aspects of history, legal issues, and artist backgrounds regarding street art in Barcelona. Yet, it soon evolved into a search for its context and culture in the moment of encounter, which provided me with the opportunity to analyse street art by its location and meaning in community. This essay, therefore, aims to analyse where and why Barcelona street art is produced.

The City of Barcelona is widely known to have some of the most interesting street art in the world, and I was lucky enough to travel there to complete a cultural study using street art as my subject. The original intention for this project was to research and include aspects of history, legal issues, and artist backgrounds as they related to street art. But early in my experience, as I started walking the streets looking for street art, I became more drawn to focus in on contexts and cultures as I encountered them. Having a more direct experience taking place at the moment of encounter gave me the opportunity to analyse street art by understanding its location and meaning in community. Walking endlessly, I came to recognise many artists and photograph their work, but the project became less and less about their individual 'brand' and more about the social implications and ramifications of their work. And though those other aspects could not be entirely discounted as having influenced me, in the end my goal was to understand where and why street art was produced.

An *encounter* is defined as a meeting –sudden or unexpected– by chance (Oxford Dictionaries

2016b). This was what I hoped for: To have direct encounters with street art. By doing so, situate myself in the *present* situation, making an 'encounter', and experiencing the various situations and circumstances as *I* imagined them. In this

way I was to open my mind and allow impressions to emerge. Being alone in an unknown city I was provided a great opportunity to focus on these encounters and not be distracted by others, their thoughts or opinions. This became my preferred working framework; to explain my encounters with street art, and at the same time seek to understand why they are situated in particular locations.

With a plethora of diversity embedded in street art's creation, I believe it is wise, as Sansi (2015) says, to use the commonly accepted definition of street art as being, simply, 'art in the street'. But though a simple definition I still needed to prepare myself with some practical understanding before walking the streets alone. So initially I joined in with two small street art tours (Barcelona Street Style Tour n.d.) to gain some insight into techniques and applications along with background information about the more well-known artists and their work. And this was very helpful, but whether tags, murals, stencils, paste-ups, stickers, installations, famous or not, I quickly found it wise to store the information and get onto to experiencing my own encounters –alone.

Reflections pivot on everyday encounters

Frow & Morris (1993) and Highmore (2002) maintain that it is in the everyday lives of people that it shows how a social group or community is organised and structured, and this, the 'everyday', can provide ideas on how a culture is formed or shaped. And so out I set to encounter street art in the everyday settings of Barcelona. Frow & Morris (1993) also state that thinking deeply is an important investigative tool, from which valuable meanings can emerge on culture. They add, using deep and (what I will call) 'curious' thinking is a technique to problematise observations, and it creates a process that will not undermine or hinder, but help a study. As Highmore (2002) recommends taking and using these ideas as they relate to 'everyday' lives, so I, as an outsider wandered the streets alone, being conscious of the everyday activities surrounding me. To study culture, I realised, meant observing and noting the differences in locations and situations across the city, watching out for patterns of human activity and how people participate, all symbolic and meaningful of a culture (Williams 1993: 90-91). Highmore also says culture should not be thought of as a singular concept as it

has many parts or elements, and any concept is continuously fluid. People or groups are constantly in it, out of it and overlapping with it. It may be a circulating process, but it relies on participation and 'sets' of practices developing to distinguish the ways of life of people, and thus it becomes a culture where can be explained the various meanings in their contexts.

With streets to cover and so much to consider, I became quickly aware of the need to stop 'striding it out' and slow down my walking to allow me time to be curious, to think more, and to question what I was seeing. Intervening in a completely unknown culture was a new experience for me, bringing forth strong and subjective responses; surprise, shock, amusement and even distress to name a few. But having learned previously from Johnson et al. (2004) that in any study my own bias or 'partialness' can position me to be more subjective than is useful, I knew I would not be entirely immune from such responses. I needed to remind myself to take this into account by being 'reflexive' and remember to think about 'others' as well as myself when such responses cropped up (Johnson et al. 2004; Sauko 2003: 64). My perspectives or views for this analysis may be valid, but practised reflexivity would lead to a better balanced analysis.

The production of meanings

The many locations I visited led to cultures being explained by the contexts I observed. An unknown city has the potential to deliver a great diversity in everyday living and Barcelona did not disappoint. Once in a location I was able to develop my ideas as I intermingled with the people and imagine what might be happening in 'this' particular context. Cultural educators (Poyton & Lee 2000: 4) remind me, as an observer, it was my job to find meanings in context in order to know and understand culture. By really 'seeing' the places and spaces, the people and their practices, and overlaying the street art, I sought to find reasons for it to be there and meanings within or surrounding it. The question I asked myself time and again was: "Why is this street art *here*?" Let's say street art is a practice produced (or done) in a context as a response to circumstances. If Yue (2003: 171) calls 'eating' a practice, then street art is a practice. Both require an acceptance that people construct their own identity and views on how they wish to live their lives and do their daily activities. As street art is an act of 'doing' (as is eating), the 'doing' is what produces it and the meanings are central to it (or the artist's identity in this case). To be kept in mind also is that the practice and the doing can often be in retaliation to bureaucracy (Yue 2003). But as I only really understand this in relation to street art, not eating, why are they doing it?"

Street artists obviously 'flaunt the rules' in the characterful old alleyways and plazas of the Gothic Quarter, Raval and El Born. It was apparent here that though the mass of street art was

a predominantly illegal pursuit, these areas provided a superbly rich environment for the artists to work in, displaying their creativity on walls, doors, roofs, posts, and shutters. I could see it was a vibrant, constantly evolving production, likely to the chagrin of the Municipal Council who consider unauthorised street art a criminal activity (Currie 2013). And it likely frustrated many residents, though I only saw a very few attempting to clean off their doors and walls. Really it seemed they had no chance to keep their doors clean and 'blank' at any point, as, street art, old or new, defaced or sacrosanct, was just about everywhere! At one time I was so mesmerised by a fascinating stencil positioned amongst other art on a door, when the resident opened the door, *my* face was right in *his* face, what a shock it was for both of us! What must it be like in tourist season? Such a densely populated space, completely overlayed with street art, making it a gallery of the streets, free for everyone. As such these areas are high on the list for tourist marketing (Barcelona Street Style Tour n.d.; Barcelona Tourisme n.d.). But what about if *you* lived there? How would you feel?

But then interspersed in this area, a small plaza with large mural paste ups of hundreds and hundreds of photos of the smiling faces of the locals, apparently expressing love of (their)

community. And places where small community gardens and even smaller play areas were surrounded by little creative touches (quite obviously done by many of the same artists seen elsewhere), functioning as a place of recreation and enjoyment for parents and children of the area, or anyone else who might pass by. It appeared to me there was some extra effort taken here to inject some 'fun and joy' into these particular environments. Whether planned, or random, the collaborations were heart-warming to see, but left me with a sense that there were more serious issues faced by these communities.

And disputes were very obvious in certain areas. I saw an obvious 'fight back' by the local community against municipal authority in the working class areas situated behind the Novotel. Here the 're-urbanisation' plan was encroaching on not just the working class residents and their homes, but also on their small, somewhat old-fashioned businesses and workshops. Degen

& Garcia 2012, critics of *The Barcelona Model* as plan for 're-urbanising' certain more run down areas of Barcelona, say it has ended up being a plan that has essentially excluded or displaced residents rather than including them as promised. They report what was happening in these areas was definitely not in the spirit of what was originally intended. Residential signage saturated the area and so too graffiti apparently in support. In combination the area exuded a very contentious atmosphere which I felt as I walked around, noting the old clash with the new—a very obvious contrast.

But I also wondered if street artists just liked to be 'rudely' creative in certain areas, especially in a place of such obvious contention. I admit I wished not. But communities do seem to be a drawcard for the artist as they recognise signs of community cohesion, but also resistance to

something else at the same time. And that can be easily understood if you accept (which I do) the notions Lemke (2001) and Foucault (1979) put forward that power relations are formed where resistance by the people against authority can generally be said to challenge a governing authority and their efforts to have or keep control over the people. Therefore, it could be thought that the creative expressions of the street artists in Barcelona appear to be in line with community on the one hand, but resisting authority on the other. But, apparently this is nothing new, as I am assured by activist Aden Ricketts (2012) such creative practices have been around for a long time, and used time and time again as tools of resistance in many different settings.

The power relationships surrounding street art must include both artists and the people resident in each location in which it appears. They are likely the people it affects most after all. But if street art is just a connecting factor, where do you start? Thwaites, Davis & Mules (1994: 1-2) say, it is best to look for the production of meanings by asking questions. "What is significant here? What is special or different there? What values might this community hold? Are there any social processes I recognise?" And from there on ask: "Who has the power, who resists whom, what are the relationships, how do people participate?" Oh my goodness, such a lot of questions to consider, but how else would I understand? Looking for meanings and reasons in street art can be confusing at times, but an incredibly interesting process nonetheless.

Of course a piece of street art could just be seen as a wonderful creative expression, but the question to ask is, does it support an issue, does it have a purpose, is it resisting authority in

some way? It cannot be discounted that there is acceptability of illegal street art in certain contexts. Within the old city precinct I saw a large and colourful mural completely filling the fence at the rear of a playground wall next to a small plaza. It looked just right there. Apparently it was illegal, but as it was also compatible to the playground environment, authorities had let it stand (Barcelona Street Style Tour, no date.). And why not? The children had a colourful backdrop to their playground with (I imagine) not a cent spent by Council. Therefore, I would say that street art can become, or be, part of an acceptable story of people and community. And for that same reason I believe street art *always* belongs to its context.

Street artists produce their art as a response to something that happens or changes and it is these circumstances that call them to action. The coming together of people as the result of change

results in an emotional response, causing people to act in different ways (Stewart 2007). One example is where street artists have the urge to respond to a blank wall by filling it, as quickly as possible, possibly for fear of getting caught or because if they don't, someone else will! An urgent or thrilling response says Currie (2013), to get there first and/or satisfy the artists' desires to create new art or just impulsively challenge authority with their art. I saw this myself, right behind my hotel. A blank wall one evening, filled by the very next morning!

Jenkins (2006: 2) explains there is always a "flow of content" moving around, across and between individuals and groups, and such movement or migration is what activates expressions that can go anywhere to "satisfy the creators of the experience", though he does add that it can be quite obscure as it relates to connections with people, circumstances or issues. This point, important to consider, left me with more questions than answers, though does lead me quite nicely to 'convergence theories'!

The definition of *convergence* is that it is the process of (things) moving together from different directions and meeting up; it is the point where this happens (Oxford Dictionaries 2016a). So if an action creates a convergence or joining of something, as with street art moving to sit

between and/or a part of something else, it is worth investigating. Banet-Weiser (2011) says that when convergence produces something else, it can produce something of different value at that very moment. She explains; using convergence theories can help to provoke a process of thinking, and re-thinking, and even thinking again. And this relates to street art, as she believes that while it is easily and widely recognised as being only dependent on space, convergence of cultures is a consequence of its production in location. Lemke's (2001) view supports this theory of convergence, calling it creativity taking place within the moment of another cultural context. If street art by its very creation is a tool that helps form these new relationships, then the street artist as the creator, so too creates convergences –between artists, artists and community, or even artist, community and authority.


Shopkeeper and artist convergence was common. In many locations art appeared to be arranged or 'commissioned'. Strategically placed on shutters and doors it became advertising for the shopkeepers' products and services, but did not appear immune from random tagging or defacement. Walking down the hill from the old bullring near Glories, not sure where I was heading, I wandered into some of these 'low key suburbs' with their local stores and businesses. This was art melding with community, organised, orderly and not appearing particularly contentious. As a shopkeeper's daughter, this area reminded me of my childhood living in a small suburb full of shops. The local sign-writer coming and going, changing prices on the windows, creating colourful flourishes, winking at me as he left. I fell into quiet comfort here, it was restful and I understood it.

I also saw 'convergences of the highly productive kind' (Degen & Garcia 2012), in the alleyways of El Born, Gothic and Raval, areas famously interesting to the hordes of travellers, and also arts students (Barcelona Tourisme n.d.). Street art is so prolific here that it had a competitive feel to it, there was a 'competition for space', and a competition to be a part of other artists' work. This was art over art, within art, around art, above and below art. I stood looking into these amazing productions for hours on end, trying to make sense or reason from them, but in the end deciding artists just 'had to be there', as part of something greater perhaps.
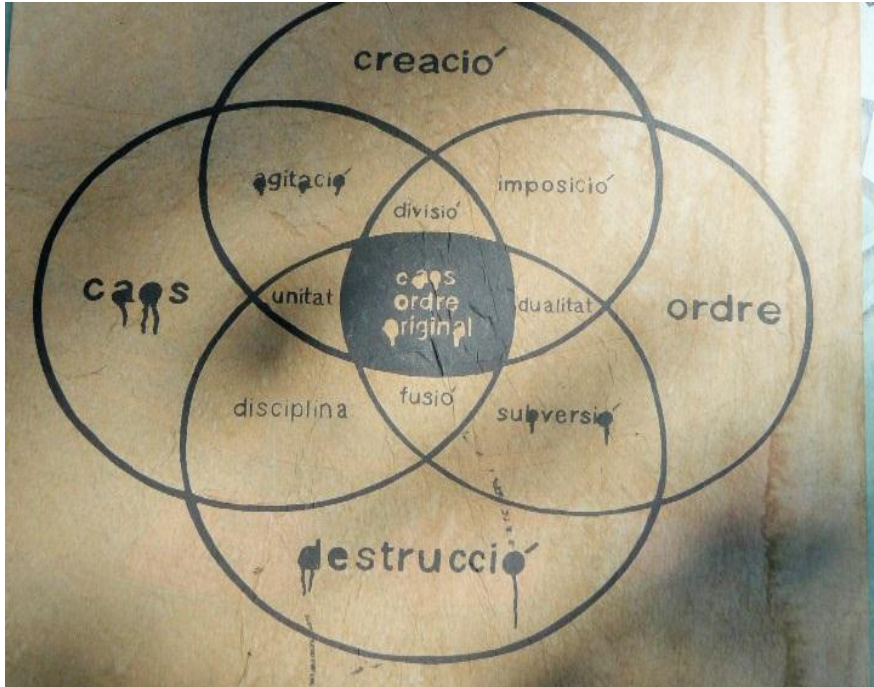
And then there were 'convergences of the highly political kind' (Degen & Garcia 2012). Convergence resulting in disruption at re-development sites like those areas behind the Novotel. By aligning with messages on flags and signs put up by residents, street art can creatively help to enhance and reinforce a community's feeling of injustice. This seemed to provoke authority to act, possibly based on their relationship with the developers, as when I was walking there I saw the Municipal Council's clean-up teams hard at work erasing what they could from walls and barriers. And I mean "what they could", as locals and street artists positioned many messages high up and well above street level –places difficult to reach, the clean-up teams dealing with what they could mainly at street level. Street artists partnering with residents, adapting by using unreachable spaces to continue to emphasise messages of dissent.

When I think of types of convergence, "the emotive kind" affected me the most. Spaces in which sadness, frustration and anger were captured through creative expression. A mural I came across in Raval depicted the sadness and dis-enfranchisement of immigrant people being forced from the area. The mural was on large steel plates boarding up buildings and squats in which poor and marginalised ethnic groups once lived, or fought to remain (Barcelona Field Studies Centre 2016). This art, where trendy residences and cafes are popping up to replace the semi-derelict housing opportunities for the poor, is a response to authority 're-urbanising' by means of exclusion. Such characterful and socially important alleyways were starting to experience the 'Social cohesion' as *The Barcelona Model* intends (Barcelona Field Studies Centre 2016; Degen & Garcia 2012). The mural with such sad depictions of a community struggling to survive took my breath away.

Another very moving and extremely large mural in Raval is on a long fence surrounding a derelict site. Here street artists have depicted an incidence of police brutality causing the death of a resident in 2013 that had shocked the community (anitasfeast 2015). And though highly evocative and critical of local policing, the mural remains intact, apparently for fear of further community protest if it was to be removed.

And on a corner in El Born, a mural created by many artists collaborating with locals to protest against forced change to local community and the culture of the precinct. Protests, continuing

while I was there, seemed to go unheeded as Council was fencing off the site ready for removal. So controversial the site, it even has its own Facebook page (Defensa del muro del born). By its very creativity the strength of community sentiment was obvious, but still it was seen as a threat by local authority. Pausing in these communities, viewing their creations and seeking to understand the circumstances, I often became moved to tears. Just writing about it makes my heart sink –again.

None of my observations and interpretations would have had much traction without accepting ideas contained in convergence theories. After all, where would the artist be without the space of the 'other', the collaboration of the 'other', or the resistance of the 'other'. Convergence happens because of an 'other'. It can be seen everywhere, it can be imagined everywhere; it is everywhere. When it happens, something else is always produced. It operates within a space and produces a power dynamic, but always at different levels and strengths (Banet-Weiser 2011). It helps to explain why street artists and their productions create a power play everywhere they converge, as their very mobility means they drop in to 'other' cultural settings. They create or produce their art in someone else's space, which causes a change to relationships in this location or context, and relates directly to Danaher & Schirato (2000: 80) discussing Foucault's ideas on power being an ever-changing force, essentially belonging to no-one, which moves through and around people, groups and institutions, and forms relationships that compete and relate.

The prolific nature of street art, whether challenging the law or just flaunting its creative muscle, must truly test the Municipal regimes and be a continuing concern to authority dedicated to keeping law and order in Barcelona (Bel & Warner 2009). As the key to 'good' governance is control of populations (Foucault 1994), Barcelona Municipal Council constantly face challenges to keep street art in check, to keep it where they want it to be and destroy it where they don't want it to be. Take that area behind the Novotel. I witnessed Police patrols and clean-up teams working the area daily to contain or eliminate street art around the 'approved' demolition and re-urbanisation sites, but I also saw an instance where the moment they were gone, artists were back in action. Ricketts (2012) would say this activism is happening in a context where social dissatisfaction with the system triggers a creative action. And I would say, a power struggle at its best, and activism at its finest!

But there also seems to be an increasing acceptance of the 'urban cool' of street art in particular situations and circumstances (Banet-Weiser 2011). I'd read about legal places allocated for

street art expression, and I certainly I saw for myself quite a lot of obviously Council approved street art in public spaces and plazas (Street Art Barcelona 2014). But being 'legal' does not seem to guarantee that art will remain intact, as I noticed various artists 'contributing' to the original work, appearing sometimes to complement the work and other times to deface it. According to Street Art Barcelona (2014), artists can agree with Council to create on these sites, but once work is completed those same sites become 'up for grabs'.

I also noticed that some, most likely illegal, but particularly creative and pleasing installations were often left untouched by others as they seemed to neither disturb nor offend anyone. Two pigeons painted atop ancient brass water taps in a small public square near El Born were my favourites. They were gorgeous. Why on earth would *anyone* want to remove them? But then
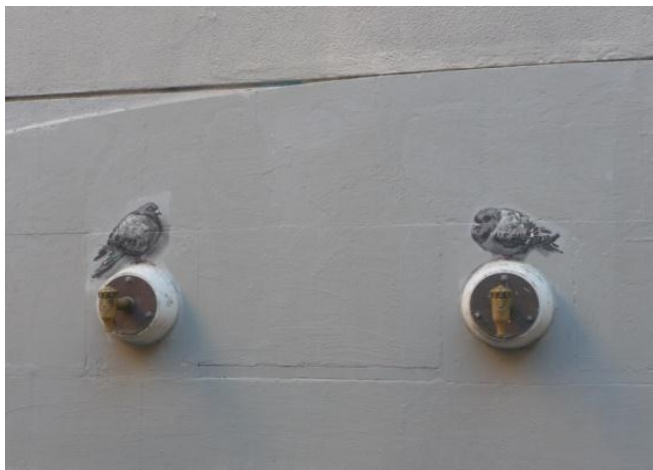
I heard (but cannot verify) the story. Originally there were three pigeons, the third being a 'dead' pigeon lying just below the taps. Suspicion is Council removed it. Why? Did it offend? What was my position? I too thought such pleasing art should stay. So what if I had seen the third pigeon? I will add that I was really much more interested in street art that had greater impact or something strong to say, but I do wonder if there was another story attached to the 'three' pigeons. I digress.

When I look more deeply at shifting power I can see where Grewel (2005: 87) may be right by saying certain actions could shift the culture of a city. This could apply to street art as a cultural expression and how it is responded to by authority at any given time. Is it possible the more powerful responses from artists and community shift the power back and forth enough to shift culture to any degree? What does 'authority' do, defend its position, give in or compromise? Frow & Morris (1993) make the point that attempting to change any culture or cultural activity means having to challenge the everyday lives of people and trying to change their conduct. So, when authority uses power to try to force through change, for example with the re-urbanisation projects mentioned (Degen & Garcia 2012), it clearly demands changes to attitudes. But I have seen for myself that 'enforcement' can create a resistance to change so powerful, that when

community sentiment combines with the creativity of street as protest, it becomes an almost 'public' force to be reckoned with. A push for cultural change coming from both sides, is a fine example of what Highmore (2009) calls a passionate response by community in relation to an institutional structure trying to force 'social cohesion' through structures of rules and regulations. Banet-Weiser (2011) was right in saying street art has leverage, for when people or communities rise up to reject or challenge power, it has the power to make the observer, the community, or the authority sit up and take notice. Firat & Kuryel (2011) believe so, calling street art a form of 'cultural activism' that disrupts and provokes by its strategic locations and its creative nature. They add that it is also the unconventional creativity of street art that causes responses from a much broader audience than just the community in which it is placed.

Regardless of all the contentious issues surrounding street art, its locations, and whether it should be removed or not, it is a wonder to be seen. And even though criminalised, illegal street art remains on the increase. Legislation used as a repressive tool has apparently not worked, and has possibly intensified its very creation as it grows and grows in Barcelona (Currie 2013). So I am not sure that it ever can be controlled, and can see why Currie says now is the time for it to be considered as a cultural asset to the City.

Street artists certainly break social boundaries by creating most of their work on private property or in illegal public spaces. They are not always 'activists', but are always a production. Creating street art is a socio-cultural activity, produced in the streets, within or around different communities appearing in many different contexts. Variously unpredictable and complex, yet decisive and clear, but often seemingly unfinished. I continue to wonder if these productions resolve anything, or achieve anything conclusively.

Street artists and street art can definitely be characterised as a sub-culture. Bunting (2012) explains a sub-culture as a group that shares many activities, beliefs, rituals and habits, and (citing Becker 1963) says that street art could even be described as a deviant sub-culture. I only had to walk the streets to see that street artists have much in common, and are often connected, but will say that I'm not going into whether street artists are 'deviant' or not. Their most common ground is the illegal 'urban context', though less certain to me is their shared beliefs. Noting their creative individuality, but taking into account their many collaborations, points to their common practice of sharing spaces.

The mobility of this sub-culture brings with it shifting and changing productions and a great diversity of creativity. It is temporary, it is destroyed, and it is reinvented. Street art often seems incomplete as it morphs in and around other cultures and other artists' work. It is an unstoppable force of creativity that emerges from socio-political conditions and circumstances that seem to force the artist to act (Currie 2013). I will name it 'a very contemporary convergence culture'. And it is so prolific, there seems an imperative to produce due to urgency or desire. It is a language of the streets that can 'speak to your soul', and is constantly creating new connections beyond the street itself, but at the same time staying quite 'undefinable' (Currie 2013).

Conclusion

During this study, unbeknown to the street artists, I developed a sort of empathic relationship from walking amongst them. As they became more and more familiar, it warmed my heart each

time I encountered their work on a door, a shutter or in an alleyway. I wanted to cheer them on. I had no idea my experience would move me in this way. Going out alone to complete this study was an unexpected experience in personal development and a huge contrast to my classroom experiences.

Setting aside the law, history, politics, artist's backgrounds and artistic merit allowed this study to become much more about the complex cultural and contextual aspects that emerge with the convergence of street art in community. That is where my thoughts and feelings went as I walked, and as a result contributed to the development of my knowledge and understanding to a great extent. It is clearer to me now how cultures and communities overlap and interconnect in the everyday, and how change is a powerful motivator that is responded to through action. Street art is a fine example of how multifarious meanings continue to form and circulate and create power relations in each context. Not previously considered in my studies, 'convergence theories' have emerged as most significant to understanding how street art operates as a sub-culture, and the reasons street art functions as a powerful force within other cultures.

My simplistic and superficial pre-conceptions of graffiti as vandalism and street art as creative and so acceptable have now been abandoned. I found the production of street art an interesting and complex subject to investigate –and a subject that I continue to think about. Street art in Barcelona City is so aesthetically strong, thrillingly rich and prolific, it cannot be ignored nor entirely controlled. It is a sub-culture and yet an integral part of many other cultures. The meanings or reasons for the production of street art are numerous, but I found could be understood in certain contexts. Based only on encounters and subject to location, my personal interpretations and conclusions have most definitely been formed by deeply reflecting on everyday lives, activities and power relations formed in the communities of the fascinating city of Barcelona. Not my typical travel experience, but a revealing and invigorating experience in a new way. A real and lived experience that challenged me in the moment of time. I ask myself: "Will this particular experience affect my next travel adventure?"

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Beth Taylor has recently completed an Associate Degree in Indigenous Studies and a Bachelor Degree majoring in Communication and Cultural Studies and Australian Indigenous Studies at Southern Cross University Lismore, New South Wales, Australia. The project that brought her to the city of Barcelona was based on completing a cultural study of street art. This paper examines the cultural contexts and meanings produced in and by the specific locations in which street art was encountered.