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Book Review: For Contributors to This Collection, “Public” Is the Defining Identity

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For Contributors to This Collection, “Public” Is the Defining Identity

Reviewed by Jay Lamar

Katharyne Mitchell, editor, *Practising Public Scholarship: Experience and Possibilities Beyond the Academy*, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, 152 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4051-8912-5

Contributors: Terry Eagleton, Patricia Limerick, Michael Buraway, Melissa W. Wright, Paul R. Ehrlich, David Domke, Julia Reinhard Lupton, Dennis Raphael, Katherine O’Donnell, Paul Chatterton, Meghan Cope, Walden Bello, Katherine Beckett, Don Mitchell, Stephen Bezručka, Julie Ellison, Peter McLaren, Jenny Pickerell, Howard Zinn, Doreen Massey

The essays in Katharyne Mitchell’s *Practising Public Scholarship* are fundamentally autobiographical narratives of transformation. The contributors, including Terry Eagleton, Julie Ellison, Paul Ehrlich, and Howard Zinn, trace their evolution from academics, scholars, and intellectuals to public academics, public scholars, and public intellectuals. The emphasis is clear in Mitchell’s title.

A suspect term in some academic circles, public is nevertheless the defining identity for these writers and researchers. What that means for them individually may begin in such obvious activities as writing op-eds, participating in social protests, and the rather mundane activities of copyediting posters and press releases designed to communicate activism of one kind or another.

However, these personal forays into public nudge the contributors to think deeply about their responsibilities to their institution, their students, and their communities. What happened to make them susceptible or compelled to begin the journey ranges from an upbringing that valued education to personal participation in politics to reading and reflecting on a seminal text. These paths are both deliberate and accidental. As Limerick notes, “Career-wise, improbability and adventure have become my norm” (11). Most of the contributors would concur.

And that is part of the allure—a chance to make scholarship relevant to problems and challenges

and to apply it to the search for solutions. Mitchell notes in her introduction: “My sense is that what creates a public scholar is related to a profound urge to participate and intervene in the political practices of the world—to fight injustice or correct information or provide a needed service—in short, to try to make the world a better place, corny as that sounds” (2).

Corny, maybe, but also compelling when, as Eagleton writes, public intellectuals “find some way of bringing their particular academic expertise to bear on a matter of public importance” (7).

Mitchell’s contributors speak to the challenges of becoming public: how to make engagement a platform for scholarship, how to craft a language that reflects scholarship but translates clearly to public audiences, how to negotiate resistance within the academy (including issues of tenure and promotion). The latter, succinctly stated by Mitchell as the challenge of “becoming a public scholar and...intervening politically in the world, *while remaining within a university system*” (p. 4, author’s emphasis) is no small matter.

Of course, the contributors to *Practising Public Scholarship* are the ones who survived and thrived. Their disciplines span sociology, English, women’s studies, geography, and environmental sciences, among others. While their experiences may be discipline-specific, their wisdom is universal. Practical advice includes strategic career choices that make the journey easier. Dennis Raphael suggests choosing “an academic discipline that allows incorporation of the political into academic inquiry” (p. 64). Limerick takes it further: “Apply, to the world around you, the methods they taught you in graduate school for assessing evidence...keep your hypotheses in a limber and flexible state... resist the common human habit of celebrating the evidence that supports your pre-existing point of view, while dismissing the evidence that invites

you to question your original assumptions” (p. 16).

Ultimately, each of the contributors would like to encourage the next generation to make the leap, primarily because, as Limerick states: “I cannot shake the idea, composed of equal parts gloom and cheer, that the minds of faculty and students are the most under-utilized renewable resources in the United States today” (p. 15). In the end, this is the audience for *Practising Public Scholarship*. If, as O’Donnell notes, “the most difficult task remains developing enduring student and institutional commitment” (p. 72), it is crucial that established and emerging public scholars begin and continue to produce and promote academically respected,

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publicly accessible scholarship that makes a difference in the world. *Practising Public Scholarship* is a road map for that journey.

About the Reviewer

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