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Book Review: If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography by Didier Fassin

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Fassin, Didier, ed. *If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 368 pages, Paperback \$27.95.

Didier Fassin, a social scientist, edits this collection of works examining various authors' experiences with fieldwork and participant observation in a global context. The contributing authors, representing a diverse group of social scientists specializing in anthropology, global health, sociology and political science, of *If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography* share their journey of researching human subjects and presenting their research to the public, through publication. The contributors are explained to be "taking a risk" (p.9), which is evidenced in their individual cases where they present their findings or "truths" as power. The contributors of this text illustrate the ways in which researchers communicate their findings, which are grounded in theoretical underpinnings.

Fassin explains that the publication process involves making private information public, which inevitably involves popularization and politicization. The afterlife of researchers' work is also highlighted and illustrates how various publics interpret, politicize, or use researchers' final product or publications. In the editors' discussion of popularization and politicization, he highlights the importance of selecting a topic of research and the challenge of presenting the findings to the public in a clear, non-technical manner, which is applicable to all social scientists developing a research design. Additionally, politicization is of importance to social science research, as dilemmas of how to present findings in an illustrative approach while avoiding breach of confidentiality of participants, and contributes to continuous debates in the field appropriately.

Fassin shares his experience in his fieldwork and how those experiences lead to the second component of ethnography, which is writing. While social scientists may not be researching such controversial issues that are highly political, which was the focus of Fassin's

research and observation of minorities in the criminal justice system, this work provides a much-needed discourse to researchers concerned with how their findings may be construed by the public, including journalists, policy makers, and advocacy groups. The editor writes, “Social scientists who practice ethnography often consider that their scientific work ends with publication”; and while most social scientists have an intended audience, the art of communicating the findings is a challenge, particularly when there is a goal of the work being popular and accepted for its merit, rather than a mere political statement (p.315). This work would be applicable to anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and more, as these disciplines study human beings and their behaviors, presenting findings that would be of interest to media, advocacy groups, and policymakers alike.

A major contribution that Fassin and the contributing authors make in this text is their illustration of how social science researchers can construct and present their findings in writing. Three elements common to ethnography research—but are applicable to other social science research methodological approaches—are emphasized, which are translation, discussion, and expansion (p.316). Researchers across the social science disciplines often are faced with the challenge of presenting the big picture of their findings that will be appropriate for their intended audience. Throughout this process, the translation process is important and should be completed with attention to detail, while the discussion of and expansion should be undertaken with care and forecasting. This work offers insight into the impact researchers’ words have on the public and in turn, the perception of the authors’ credibility, validity, and abilities. Fassin’s work would be useful to all social scientists pondering how to present their findings to the public, while also grounding their contribution in theoretical frameworks that will be clearly understood. Thus, the

importance of crafting a thorough discussion and expansion should not be understated, as these are core components of social science publications.

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