

Mitchell, K. (Ed.). (2008). *Practising Public Scholarship: Experiences and Possibilities Beyond the Academy*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Review by Frank Fear

P*ractising Public Scholarship* is a volume of autobiographical vignettes—of 20 scholars describing and interpreting their engagement journeys. The chapters are written as intensely personalized narratives, presented candidly and emotionally, with a compelling sense of purpose.

Most contributors did not begin careers as engaged scholars, editor Mitchell tells readers: “They were pulled into [this work] . . . rather than seeking it out” (p. 3). As engagement immigrants, these scholars have important things to say, especially in terms of what they have learned about themselves and their work. There is “intellectual schizophrenia” (p. 3), as Mitchell calls it, in many stories, expressions of confusion and uncertainty—of being pulled in different directions, confronting critics, and responding to self-proclaimed feelings of professional inadequacy. Some contributors battle an identity crisis: What am I doing? Why? Where is this work going? Am I foolish for doing it? One after another, the authors attempt to answer a basic question: Who am I?

Some readers might find perplexing the disquieting nature of the authors’ narratives. “Engagement isn’t always this way,” some might conclude: “This is neither the engagement I do nor the feelings I have about the work. What’s up here?”

The genesis of these stories is related to the writers’ identities: by personal declaration these are “public intellectuals”—mostly humanists with a scattering of social scientists and communications scholars—whose work is dedicated to matters of social justice. The challenge each resolves through this work is finding a satisfying and workable way to continue one’s career as “a credible scholar” and, at the same time, to make palpable contributions to “the cause.”

These public intellectuals are scholar-*activists*, not scholar-*practitioners* like most engaged scholars. The difference between activist and practitioner is a matter of politics. Mitchell expresses it this way: “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 misinformation or provide a needed service—in short, to try to make the world a better place, corny as that may sound. But is this desire compatible with the academic project?”

Painfully, many contributors find that it is not. Not a single story ends, however, with that conclusion. One after another, contributors tell us that they ended up rejecting the academic default option of pursuing social justice only in private life, thereby keeping one's scholarly work "clean." Alternatively—often at great professional risk and frequently without a clear plan at the outset—they became viable scholars *and* balanced, whole persons. The hyphen (in scholar-activist) comes to have real meaning: scholarship and activism are juxtaposed in mutually enriching ways without either overwhelming (or detracting from) the other.

This realignment effort is especially important for public intellectuals who seek to express their work outside traditional means, an approach that contributor Michael Burawoy calls "organic" (p. 25). In traditional public intellectualism there is scholarship *about* something: scholars study a phenomenon (say, the life circumstances of young people in an inner-city public housing facility), and then share what they learn with academic peers through typical outlets, such as conference presentations, book chapters, and journal articles. Although a considerable amount of public scholarship is done that way (important and good work, at that), it is not engagement. In organic work, on the other hand, a scholar gets involved *in* something through firsthand experience, and the work undertaken is done *with* nonacademic partners. Because of this approach, learning is not only shared with academic peers, it is also used to inform an activist agenda. In working this way, Burawoy says that the organic public intellectual "steps out of the protected environment of the academy and reaches into the pockets of civil society . . . into an unmediated dialogue with neighborhood associations, with communities of faith, with labor movements, with prisoners . . . [in ways that are] likely to be local, thick, active" (p. 25).

When public intellectuals become engaged scholars, that outcome offers more than the opportunity to achieve the goal of the project. At the heart of the enterprise is *hope*. Contributor David Domke explains: "When scholars highlight opportunities for social change, we offer hope. When scholars help people to negotiate systems in ways that more fully honor their humanity, we offer hope. When scholars provide tools that allow people to take greater control over personal and cultural choices, we offer hope. And when scholars drop our detachment and adopt an ethic of engagement, we offer hope" (p. 42). Contributor Katherine O'Donnell adds depth to the portrait of public scholarship: it is about "learning to work cooperatively to construct just, collective responses to the

structural problems we all face—using the tools of our trade to facilitate this work” (p. 67).

Ultimately, the chapters of Mitchell’s book are about blending profession and personhood. “It’s just pure decency,” contributor Walden Bello concludes: “I think one should do something worthwhile with one’s life” (p. 91).

There are many ways to do that, of course. The majesty of this volume is that we are introduced to 20 colleagues who show us how.

About the Reviewer

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JHEOE Associate Editor for Book Reviews, Ted Alter (who is Professor of Agricultural, Regional, and Environmental Economics at Penn State), and Editor, Trish Kalivoda (who is Senior Associate Vice President for Public Service and Outreach at the University of Georgia) thank Wiley-Blackwell, for providing complimentary copies of the book for this review.