**FQS** FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH Sozialforschung

Review:

*Colin Hastings, Leigha Comer & Eric Mykhalovskiy*

**Didier Fassin (Ed.) (2017). If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography**. Durham: Duke University Press; 358 pages; ISBN 9780822369653; cloth: $104.95; paperback: $27.95

**Abstract**: Didier FASSIN's new edited collection brings together public anthropologists and sociologists who reflect on the challenges and stakes related to the dissemination, promotion, reception, and utilization of their ethnographic research. The book centers on two questions. First, what kind of difference does ethnography make when research findings are transported into the public domain? Second, what happens in this encounter between ethnographers and their publics? In order to address these questions, contributors offer ethnographic accounts of the public reception of their ethnographic research. As the book illustrates the variety of public encounters and diverse issues that arise in the process of ethnography "going public," it offers valuable contributions to multidisciplinary discussions related to ethnographers' political and ethical commitments.

**Table of Contents**

## 1. The Intricacies of Public Ethnography

"If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography" is a collection edited by French sociologist, anthropologist, and physician, Didier FASSIN. FASSIN is a professor of social science at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ, USA. He is widely known for his ethnographic research on HIV in South Africa, particularly his book "When Bodies Remember" (2007), as well as his more recent ethnographies of prisons and the punitive state, including "At the Heart of the State: The Moral World of Institutions" (2015) and "Prison Worlds: An Ethnography of the Carceral Condition" (2017). [1]

In "If Truth Be Told," thirteen scholars (most of whom are anthropologists) reflect on their encounters with various publics who make use of and respond to their published ethnographic research—what the contributors refer to as the "public

afterlife of ethnography." In so doing, they challenge the assumption that ethnography ends when ethnographers go home (FASSIN, 2017, p.1). Together, the chapters bring into view various strategies that ethnographers employ as they engage with multiple, "concrete publics" and prompt readers to consider various possibilities, risks and tensions that arise when "ethnography goes public." [2]

This edited collection is a productive contribution to ongoing discussions about engaged anthropology (CUNHA & LIMA, 2010; FASSIN, 2013; HALE, 2008; LOW & MERRY, 2010; SCHEPER-HUGHES, 2009) and public sociology (ACKER, 2005; BURAWOY, 2005; CLAWSON, ZUSSMAN, MISRA, GERSTEL & STOKES; 2007; CREESE, McLAREN & PULKINGHAM, 2009; HANEMAAYER & SCHNEIDER, 2014). One tendency of the existing literature is to promote the practice of public sociology or anthropology, in one form or another. This book moves past the simple entreaty to "do public anthropology" and, instead, invites readers to consider the complex relationships that emerge between ethnographic research and its publics at academic conferences, in undergraduate classrooms, during media interviews, in engagement with social movements, and through policy recommendations. [3]

## 2. Structure of the Book

The collection is organized into three parts. The first section offers a selection of successful *strategies* that ethnographers have employed in their interactions with various publics. In the four chapters in this section Gabriella COLEMAN, Ghassan HAGE, Kelly GILLESPIE, and Manuela Ivone CUNHA each describe the sort of public contribution that their ethnographic research has made and analyze the complex conditions in which their research was conducted. The second section discusses various forms of *engagements* sought from ethnographers by their publics. In this portion of the collection Fedrico NEIBURG, Lucas BESSIRE, Jonathan BENTHALL, and Vincent DUBOIS reflect on how their research positioned them in relation to those that participated in their study. The third part of the collection centers on cases in which *tensions* occurred in the course of researchers publicizing ethnographic research findings. The section comprises chapters by Nadia Abu EL-HAJ, Unni WIKAN, Joao BIEHL, Sherine HAMDY, and Didier FASSIN. The authors share their experiences uncovering uncomfortable truths about sensitive issues and describe the ways that they navigated the public debates in response to their research. [4]

### 2.1 Strategies

The most valuable contributions within part one of the book are those that equip readers who conduct ethnographic research with particular strategies that they can apply to their studies. Ethnographers who engage with the approaches set out in this first section will benefit from the authors' reflexive accounts that invite readers to (re)consider how public ethnographers understand notions of accountability and political commitment. For example, Manuela Ivone CUNHA's chapter, "Addressing Policy-Oriented Audiences," grapples with how public ethnographers might mediate the relationship between research and

policymaking. As an anthropologist and sociologist, CUNHA considers how ethnographers can make their findings relevant to policy-oriented audiences while maintaining an ethnographic commitment to "in-depth, complex depictions rather than [the] direct, itemized recommendations" that policymakers usually expect (p.96). In order to bridge the divide between ethnographic research and policymaking, CUNHA promotes an understanding of ethnography "not as a problem-solving tool, but as a more comprehensive resource for reasoning about a problem" (p.111). CUNHA's work documents the importance of detailed, critically engaged, and theoretically informed ethnography that brings the experiences of people most affected by policies into view. In so doing, she helps readers to recognize that publicly informed ethnography can be useful for policymakers, and at the same time, resists the sort of instrumentalization that collapses ethnographers' work into the neat, particular frames that policymakers anticipate. [5]

Gabriella COLEMAN's chapter also provides readers who conduct ethnographic research with strategies for navigating the complexities of public ethnography. COLEMAN's account of her research on the Internet activist group Anonymous recounts her approach to balancing her role as a public figure in media encounters premised on the journalistic ethics of neutrality and objectivity, and her allegiance to her sources—members of Anonymous. As a public ethnographer, COLEMAN notes that her loyalty lay with Anonymous members and that this allegiance required her to carefully consider how she framed information that she relayed to journalists. Her chapter highlights the various political commitments that public ethnographers often wrestle with as they question who they produce research for, and for what purpose. Particularly critical is COLEMAN's acknowledgment that anthropologists' responsibility to groups that they study extends beyond a commitment to do no harm, and includes an expectation that researchers will actively *contribute to* and *support* those communities. As COLEMAN points out, this convention creates a tension between anthropologists and journalists because journalists may interpret the close proximity that anthropologists strive to achieve during the course of their research as a force that runs counter to the imperative of objectivity that so thoroughly defines journalism (p.40). In reflecting on ways that ethnographers might navigate these tensions, COLEMAN recommends that public ethnographers adapt a strategy that refuses neutrality, foregrounds one's methodological and political commitments, and embraces the complexity of (sometimes conflicting) understandings of "ethical research" held by ethnographers and journalists. In so doing, COLEMAN offers readers a way of understanding ethnography as a means of producing significant political awareness and social change. [6]

**2.2 Engagements**

The second section of "If Truth Be Told" includes useful contributions to multidisciplinary discussions related to public ethnography that center the disparate concrete publics encountered by public ethnographers. For example, Vincent DUBOIS brings the complexity of these relationships into view in his account of policy ethnography. DUBOIS' chapter draws on BOURDIEU's conception of sociology as a "combat sport" to illustrate the competing interests, beliefs, and everyday experiences of those who frequent welfare offices as either clients or clerks. In addition to these tensions, DUBOIS also describes the neoliberal trends of bureaucratic welfare offices, and how these come to shape the work and political commitments of policy officials. For DUBOIS, ethnography opens up the possibility of being there: of speaking with clients, of investigating the daily bureaucratic encounters shaping clients' and workers' lives, and of identifying structural causes of both clerks' and clients' everyday experiences. What is made clear in DUBOIS' account are the ways in which ethnography offers ample opportunities for genuine, ongoing, and meaningful engagements with various publics—whether these publics are bureaucrats and policymakers, communities under study, or academic and non-academic audiences. In pursuing engagements with policymakers in particular, DUBOIS envisions ethnography not as an instrument for answering policymakers' questions, but rather as a means of producing knowledge in which policy itself is constructed as an object of research (p.185). Of course, in order to resist such policy ethnography slipping into a form of "instrumental knowledge," ethnographers require the autonomy to establish their own research questions, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies, a requirement that DUBOIS acknowledges is often compromised by the scientific, political, and practical conditions of research (p.187). [7]

**2.3 Tensions**

Much of this collection's value and usefulness rests on the way that the authors directly address the tensions and challenges that arise in the course of publicizing ethnographic findings. For instance, Sherine HAMDY draws on her experiences of ethnographic research on medicine, religion, and the ethics of organ donation in Egypt to write about the structural impediments to publicly engaged scholarship in contexts of deeply rooted political polarization. She describes how her research refutes simplistic arguments about Islamic opposition to organ donation and, instead, surfaces kidney patients' experiences of a corrupt health care system, inadequate public health services, and state reluctance to restrict organ selling. HAMDY's efforts to preserve rigor and complexity when communicating her research to varied audiences meets with refusal and opposition, particularly when listeners relate to her work from ideological positions committed to Egyptian nationalism or Orientalism. As a response to frustrations about the possibilities for public ethnography that the reception of her work occasioned, she describes her embrace of a form of "critical hopefulness" modeled on the research and political work of Palestinian ethnographer Sa'ed ATSHAN. HAMDY's discussion of developing a practice of continual ethnographic engagement and critical

hopefulness offers an important response to the allure of cynicism in contemporary academic scholarship. [8]

## 3. Critiques

Overall, "If Truth Be Told" offers thoughtful, reflexive accounts of the public afterlife of ethnography that will surely spark a range of productive exchanges among scholars invested in the public reach of social science research. As authors of this review, we share a keen interest in both conducting and engaging with ethnographic research that is designed to encounter various publics. We took up the descriptions of public ethnography included in FASSIN's collection and considered the extent to which they resonate with issues that we contend with in our ongoing ethnographic inquiries as sociologists. Here, we identify limitations to the accounts included in "If Truth Be Told." [9]

First, the book does not entirely address the challenges that contemporary public ethnographers encounter as they strive to engage with a "public" that is shifting in multiple ways. For instance, a growing tension within public ethnography that is not fully explored in the collection arises through its focus on the public reception to ethnographic research and its recognition of the diminishing public audience for published scholarly research, including ethnography. As ethnographers concerned with the public influence of our research findings, we must confront the complex challenge of how to square a focus on what happens when ethnographic research goes public with an awareness that there are fewer and fewer readers of ethnographic research. This, of course, is a perplexing task, and it is one that the book does not speak to directly. [10]

This analytic gap might have to do with the fact that many of the collection's contributors are highly accomplished senior scholars whose published books have garnered considerable public attention. This is perhaps most apparent in the book's epilogue, where FASSIN discusses his reactions to a proposal to commit four pages in the French newspaper *Libération* (including the front page) to his book "L'Ombre du monde" and the issues the book raises about "the punitive turn of society" (p.311). Few ethnographers will face the challenge of how to respond to interview requests for front-page newspaper coverage of their research and enjoy the same degree of public response. The collection largely overlooks the sorts of challenges that public ethnographers encounter more regularly. For example, researchers who position themselves as public ethnographers within increasingly neoliberal institutions must often balance their efforts to reach non-academic audiences with increasing demands to regularly publish peer-reviewed work, to secure research funding, to perform administrative roles, and to teach large undergraduate classes. Graduate students and junior scholars, especially, contend with mounting pressures associated with producing public ethnographic knowledge early in their careers. Not only are the timelines of completion within many graduate programs becoming tighter, but there also seems to be an intensifying expectation for junior scholars who position themselves as public ethnographers to address a growing digital audience and to consistently make their presence known on digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and

Facebook, in addition to academic publications. It would have been useful for contributors to consider these types of perhaps more typical challenges that come to bear on public ethnographers who are not established scholars. [11]

A second issue concerns the various technologies that instrumentalize the sharing of ethnographic research findings. In the health field, for instance, "research transfer," "knowledge mobilization," "knowledge translation and exchange" and the like are extremely popular as well as authoritative ways of conceptualizing the relationship between research and its publics. Knowledge mobilization has emerged as its own subspecialty, with its own technical vocabulary, literature and research program. Universities, including the one from which we write, now routinely commit resources to knowledge mobilization units that are integrated into the social marketing and public relations work of the institution. It is also the case that many health research funders now require detailed knowledge mobilization plans about how proposed research "findings" will be used publicly, most often by policy makers, key stakeholders, or other "knowledge users." At its worst, such demands promote highly technical, "cookie cutter"-type approaches to thinking about the "public afterlife" of research. Hearing about how ethnographers may have encountered and responded to such expectations would have made for an interesting addition to the collection. [12]

## 4. Conclusion

Didier FASSIN's edited collection is a valuable and important contribution to critical discussions on the possibilities of public ethnography in diverse settings. The book is noteworthy because it brings together thoughtful and well-informed accounts of public sociology and anthropology in order to illuminate the complex and nuanced relationships that arise when ethnography goes public. In so doing, the collection complicates straightforward appeals for researchers to engage in public ethnography and equips readers with an intimate understanding of the stakes attached to this form of inquiry. While the authors do not fully address some of the more routine, everyday challenges that many public ethnographers face, this work effectively models how ethnographers can communicate the intricacies of their public work and opens a lively space for this dialog to continue. [13]

## References

Acker, Joan (2005). Comments on Burawoy on public sociology. *Critical Sociology*, *31*(3), 327-331.

Burawoy, Michael (2005). For public sociology. *American Sociological Review*, *70*(1), 4-28.

Clawson, Dan; Zussman, Robert; Misra, Joya; Gerstel, Naomi & Stokes, Randall (Eds.) (2007). *Fifteen eminent sociologists debate politics and the profession in the twenty-first century.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Creese, Gillian; McLaren, Arlene Tigar & Pulkingham, Jane (2009). Rethinking Burawoy: Reflections from Canadian feminist sociology. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, *34*(3), 601-622.

Cunha, Manuela Ivone & Lima, Antónia (Eds.) (2010). Ethnography and the public sphere. *Etnografica*, *14*(1).

Fassin, Didier (2007). *When bodies remember: Experiences and politics of AIDS in South Africa.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Fassin, Didier (2013). Why ethnography matters: On anthropology and its publics. *Cultural Anthropology*, *28*(4), 621-646.

Fassin, Didier (2015). *At the heart of the state: The moral world of institutions.* London: Pluto Press.

Fassin, Didier (2017). *Prison worlds: An ethnography of the carceral condition.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hale, Charles (Ed.) (2008). *Engaging contradictions: Theory, politics and methods of activist scholarship.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hanemaayer, Ariane & Schneider, Christopher (2014). *The public sociology debate: Ethics and engagement.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Low, Setha M. & Merry, Sally E. (2010). Engaged anthropology: Diversity and dilemmas: An introduction to supplement 2, *Current Anthropology*, *51*(S2), S203-S226.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy (2009). Making anthropology public. *Anthropology Today*, *25*, 1-3.

## Authors

*Colin HASTINGS* is completing his PhD at York University in Toronto. His research centers on HIV and criminal law. His dissertation study is an institutional ethnography of crime reporting related to HIV non-disclosure in Canada.

Contact:

Colin Hastings

York University, Graduate Program in Sociology
4700 Keele Street, Vari Hall
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 1P3

E-mail: colinjh@yorku.ca

*Leigha COMER* researches the social organization of health care for the treatment of chronic diseases in Canada. She is interested in the organization of health care for chronic pain, but also the impact of chronic pain on sufferers' lives and identities.

Contact:

Leigha Comer

York University, Graduate Program in Sociology
4700 Keele Street, Vari Hall
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 1P3

E-mail: leigha1@yorku.ca

*Eric MYKHALOVSKIY* is a medical sociologist with expertise in institutional ethnography. His current work focuses on the intersection of HIV, public health, and the criminal law.

Contact:

Eric Mykhalovskiy, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology

York University, Department of Sociology
4700 Keele Street, Vari Hall
Toronto, Ontario
M3J 1P3

E-mail: ericm@yorku.ca

## Citation

.