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Fighting for Affirmation: A Review of Patricia Leavy's The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship

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Abstract

With *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship*, editor Patricia Leavy and a diverse array of contributing authors fight for affirmation of the value of public scholarship in mainstream academic consciousness. The result is an impressively expansive and phenomenally detailed volume that handily demonstrates not only the scientific rigor of public scholarship, but also the irreplaceable value of such work. This handbook both orients readers to the conceptual contributions of various forms of public scholarship and instructs us in concrete skills for practicing these approaches in our own work.

Keywords

Public Scholarship, Book Review, Patricia Leavy, Edited Volume, Research Methods

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Fighting for Affirmation: A Review of Patricia Leavy's *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship*

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With The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship, editor Patricia Leavy and a diverse array of contributing authors fight for affirmation of the value of public scholarship in mainstream academic consciousness. The result is an impressively expansive and phenomenally detailed volume that handily demonstrates not only the scientific rigor of public scholarship, but also the irreplaceable value of such work. This handbook both orients readers to the conceptual contributions of various forms of public scholarship and instructs us in concrete skills for practicing these approaches in our own work. Keywords: Public Scholarship, Book Review, Patricia Leavy, Edited Volume, Research Methods

As readers and editors of *The Qualitative Report*, we know full well the uniquely transformational impact of public scholarship. Yet we and other advocates of this approach across disciplines continue to fight for affirmation of its value in mainstream academic consciousness. Critiques of public scholarship often center on a supposed lack of rigor. Although such critiques often reinforce various forms of structural discrimination, they remain widespread in academic settings. With *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship*, editor Patricia Leavy and a diverse array of contributing authors take direct aim at precisely these kinds of critiques. The result is an impressively expansive and phenomenally detailed volume that handily demonstrates not only the scientific rigor of public scholarship, but also the irreplaceable value of such work. This handbook both orients readers to the conceptual contributions of various forms of public scholarship and instructs us in concrete skills for practicing these approaches in our own work. It does so through a combination of rich narrative reflection, exhaustive data analysis, and concise technical guidance. Readers new to public scholarship will come away feeling excited, energized, and empowered about bringing their work out of exclusively academic spaces and into inclusive community ones.

Dr. Leavy introduces the handbook with a conceptual overview of public scholarship and its importance both within and beyond academic spheres. She also introduces each author and their unique perspectives, going chapter by chapter through the remainder of the handbook to highlight each contribution. Chapters are organized into seven thematic sections, some more theory based and others more application oriented. Part 1, “The Changing Academic and Social Landscape, introduces readers to intersecting disciplinary contexts for the practice and interpretation of public scholarship. Part 2, “Research Design with Vulnerable Populations and Nonacademic Stakeholders,” orients readers to potential ethical conflicts and suggests strategies for addressing them through inclusive inquiry. Part 3, “Taking Traditional Methods Public,” reminds readers of the value of mainstream academic research methods for public work. Part 4, “The Arts,” takes readers intensively into creatively centered strategies for inquiry in public spaces. Part 5, “The Internet, Social Media, and Technology,” encourages readers to make ample and appropriate use of digital resources for sophisticated investigation. Part 6, “Writing and Dissemination,” prepares readers to share their findings from public scholarship widely through a variety of channels. Part 7, “Considerations,” instructs readers in additional

practical skills such as grant writing while also helping us envision the social and cultural impacts of these techniques.

Overall strengths of the book stem primarily from its consistent emphasis on unique narrative voices in both data and reflection. Although the chapters cover a diverse array of topics, all center the same basic principles of amplifying voices and encouraging thoughtful reflection on the insights they offer. The expansive array of concepts covered by the different chapters and sections make *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship* a consistently lively read; each new component of the 768-page volume feels like an exciting new start.

I found the chapters focused on health topics particularly fascinating given my own deep connections to the material. In Chapter 8, "For the Sake of Humanity," Wendy L. Sternberg describes dynamic opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration in public health promotion. This chapter inspired me with its bold vision for conscious teamwork in healing health disparities at the structural level. And in Chapter 15, "Health Theatre," Susan Cox and George Belliveau explore health challenges onstage. This chapter moved me with its delightfully literal operationalization of the dramaturgical concepts that pervade so much of the literature on illness experience. Both chapters centered researcher standpoint in health and how qualitative work amplifies those invaluable perspectives uniquely. I have long since learned this lesson well in my own research. Indeed, it inspired me to take my own scholarship public early in my career, and to sustain that effort ever since.

Some chapters make researcher standpoint the core focus, and stand among the most exciting in this volume. In Chapter 12, "Public Ethnography," Tony E. Adams and Robin M. Boylorn celebrate the power of participatory observation and interaction through the lens of ethnographic work with queer and trans populations. They frame ethnography as the ultimate framework for accessible scholarship that actively invites community members into the process, and make that case with remarkable flair through experiential reflections on core social science concepts. In Chapter 22, "Audience and Voice," Yvonna S. Lincoln, Vassa Grichko, and Glenn Allen Phillips remind readers of important truths that those of us with performing arts backgrounds often learned early in life. Specifically, they highlight the importance of tailoring messages to the audiences receiving them, and delivering those messages using voices appropriate to the dynamics of each group. This is often one of the first pieces of advice I give my students, and one frequently cited by those same learners as most impactful as they move into their own first scholarly positions.

Indeed, select chapters center the vital importance of managing people and interactions in scholarship. In Chapter 24, "Writing Collaboratively," JeffriAnne Wilder orients readers to the basics of good teamwork in writing—a skill set not frequently targeted by graduate programs, but absolutely critical for success in scholarship. The gentle and encouraging guidance offered by this chapter rings true with lessons I have learned in my own career, and sets a positive tone for students to begin collaborating early and often. And in Chapter 28, "Grant Writing as a Creative Process," Ellen Gorsevski, Kate Magsamen-Conrad, and Lisa Hanasong show how exciting collaborative writing can become when done in pursuit of resources to support future projects. This chapter inverts the idea that grant writing should be rote and clinical, instead challenging scholars to focus on telling a good story. As someone still trying to find the right balance of narrative flair and technical detail in my own grant writing, I find this guidance invaluable and expect to return to it frequently!

I also deeply appreciate the attention given in many chapters to surmounting obstacles and righting wrongs. In Chapter 7, "The Impossible Task of Community Art Practice," Jorge Lucero and William Estrada challenge scholars to think bigger and bolder about how art can function in public spaces. They bring the spirit of problem solving so prominent in the more technical handbook entries into conceptual space for artistic vision. And in Chapter 9,

“(Un)Settling Imagined Lands,” Kakali Bhattacharya weaves together theoretical and historical perspectives to refute notions of decolonization as an unattainable goal. This chapter bridges creative practice and the sociological imagination to help readers envision what a decolonized world might look like—and how to build it. As a constant advocate for progressive change both within and beyond academic settings, I have long since become intimately and distressingly familiar with the pervasive framing of eradicating racism and colonialism as impossible tasks. This chapter offers an empowering and actionable counterpoint to defeatist thinking about cultural justice.

Finally, I appreciate the emphasis on creativity and innovation that runs horizontally throughout the volume. In Chapter 19, “Online, Asynchronous Data Collection in Qualitative Research,” Tracy Spencer, Linnea Rademaker, Peter Williams, and Cynthia Loubier challenge discriminatory and stigmatizing assumptions about the value of contemporary approaches to data collection using the Internet. I felt seen by the authors’ deconstruction of ableist stereotypes about data quality, and energized by their illustration of how asynchronous approaches can add unique value. And in Chapter 23, “Creative Nonfiction in Qualitative Inquiry,” Jessica Smartt Gullion and Jessica Spears Williams encourage scholars to find our inner thriller writers. I have seen firsthand the value of using vivid storytelling to keep learners on the edge of their seats. The power of this approach translates handily to the printed page from the classrooms where we have seen students leaning forward with eyes wide, eager to know what happens next. How to make the ordinary exciting constitutes an essential and frequently underdeveloped skill in community based work.

I have very few critiques of *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship*. Especially for a first edition, this handbook provides an impressively broad and phenomenally detailed introduction to possibilities in public scholarship. It does so while amplifying an expansively diverse array of voices and biographies as well as skills and techniques. I did note at multiple points that the text did not provide a clear understanding of how to find and access supplemental resources on each topic, or from each team that contributed content for the volume. Some signposting in future editions—perhaps with offset text—would do much to alleviate this challenge. An additional minor critique centers on the omission of a signposting sentence for Part 7 (“Considerations”) in the handbook overview provided by Leavy. Having read the introductory overview closely, I felt surprised—although ultimately pleased—to encounter this section in the back of the book as a separate thematic area. Although Leavy’s overview thoroughly introduces the content for this section, it suggests that these chapters reside with other content from Part 6 (“Writing and Dissemination”). I agree with Leavy’s editorial decision to provide a separate thematic section for these chapters, and thus strongly encourage introducing it explicitly in the overview section for any future versions of the handbook.

Overall, *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship* offers a wonderful resource for methods pedagogy with extraordinary range. I recommend this handbook for instructors teaching public scholarship content in absolutely any discipline. I suspect it will prove most useful for learners in disciplines within or adjacent to the social and behavioral sciences, but still commend it as a general primer on quality public scholarship as well as an instructional resource for skill development for budding scholars in other fields. In terms of educational level, I would hesitate to use the empirical components of this book below the advanced undergraduate stage. However, the framing content provided by Leavy would absolutely be appropriate for beginner undergraduate courses as stand-alone readings. In terms of concrete applications of body content from the handbook, individual chapters could easily be used as grounding for class assignments. Instructors could create project guidelines and grading rubrics based on the principles outlined in one or more chapters focused on skills and techniques, and have students try their hand at practicing the lessons imparted by each article.

Likewise, instructors could use more theoretical chapters as inspiration for critical review or editorial writing assignments aimed at helping students write community-friendly critiques of prior research. However instructors choose to use this handbook, its diverse opportunities for discovery in public scholarship will excite and delight intermediate to advanced methods learners.

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Author Note

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