

Book Review: *A Grassroots Leadership and Arts for Social Change Primer: For Educators, Organizers, Activists & Rabble Rousers*, edited by Susan J. Erenreich and Debra DeRuyver.

By: Carly Rapaport-Stein

There is no shortage of theory or writing on leadership. *A Grassroots Leadership and Arts for Social Change Primer: For Educators, Organizers, Activists & Rabble Rousers* (hereafter, *Grassroots Leadership*) adds to the robust literature with an unique twist: leadership through artistic daring and creative doing. Editors Susan J. Erenreich and Debra DeRuyver have gathered stories across multiple disciplines that offer insight and historical perspective, bringing in the voices of over 30 artist-leaders within the pages of the book.

The primer has six sections, some organized by artistic genre, and some organized broadly by social movement and community building. Spanning visual arts, public history, theater, music, and dance, the chapters are a mash-up of case studies, interviews, reflections on art and artists' place within social movements, and first person narratives. The authors represent a broad segment as well: professors, artists, activists, historians, and government officials. The topics are equally diverse, examining artistic work and movements through approximately the last hundred years, with multiple chapters examining works during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

Grassroots Leadership is not for quick consumption or an all-in-one read. It's meaty and slow, full of theories, names, and details to sit with and contemplate. It is framed as an entry point for a wide variety of readers: educators, organizers, and artists alike. There are some barriers, though, to understanding some of this rich variety of stories. While I enjoy a dive into unfamiliar histories, the breadth of artists referenced without much context makes for extremely slow reading as I pause to search for their bodies of work -- and particularly slow going in the interview sections. The same goes for the myriad educational and social theories referenced within the pages. Many of the chapters are not accessible to a novice, which runs counter to the editor's aims of a work created "to share [their] stories in an engaging and accessible manner" (*Introduction, xxxiv*). While the open arms policy outlined in the introduction is a lovely starting point, much of the writing is also uneven, ranging from engrossing first-person narratives to arms-length academic prose.

As a teacher, I might use this text in two primary ways: as a guide for students interested in community-driven works, and as a resource for first-person artist-activist narratives. There are several case studies that cover the mechanics of the projects themselves, and one could glean a framework from some of the case studies that could be applied forward to works of one's own. The detailed framework in Katt Lissard's examination of creating theater with communities covered informative ground, and, while the writing was more academic, the content of *Walk with Me*, co-written by eight creators and addressing decolonization and reconciliation through participatory theater, offered relatively concrete and repeatable procedures for community co-creation. Danita Mason-Hogans, Wesley Hogan, and Geri Augusto offer a fascinating methodology for critical oral history, or a publicly-sourced way of remembering that goes well

outside textbooks and dominant narratives. I am eager to assign this chapter in future classes to introduce students to this manner of creating.

In the memoir and first-person narrative lane, I was particularly struck by the emotional core and powerful writing from John Flynn and David Edelman. Flynn's story emerges from a place of personal growth and realization to engage in a wider social critique, then returns to encouraging us to remember the inherent humanity in people who have been otherized and ostracized. The story has stayed with me for a few weeks, and I think would be equally powerful as a tool for classes about arts programming. I was also moved by Edelman's description of arts and AIDS activism in the 1980s, and appreciated how he drew parallels between lifelong learning and fostering learning in students (*and with full disclosure, as an adjunct professor, I work alongside David Edelman at Shenandoah Conservatory*).

The interviews in *Grassroots Leadership* are less useful as a teaching tool. They are lightly edited from the audio transcriptions, but nearly verbatim audio transcriptions often do not make for the most compelling interviews, as the warmth and connection obvious with the sound on doesn't translate as well to the lines of the page. The artists reference the names of compatriots and collaborators within the interview, but, as in many informal conversations, the speakers don't go into contextual detail, requiring much more of the reader who has little familiarity with the genre. While I appreciated that links to audio files were offered in the text, I wish that a more tech-forward option made the experience of reading or listening seamless. I also would have loved to hear more from musicians in the other chapters of the book, as song and activism have been linked for centuries — and there are extraordinary musician-leaders doing important work today.

The preface to *Grassroots Leadership* has the best summation of the book's intent: "...artist-leaders...kindle and maintain the fire of our beliefs and support and rejuvenate our actions, encouraging us not to stop until we arrive. They lead — it's that simple." (*Preface, xxx*) With stories of the artists and the projects lending a framework, the book becomes more of an historical gathering space, a collection of stories and ideas that offer a multifaceted approach to leading through and with artistic work. No one theory or model could describe the stories told here: a student could draw different conclusions on different days based on whether the reader perused a case study, personal narrative, or historical road trip. The primer is a multifaceted, ground-up approach to artistic leadership in its many forms, and the narratives contained within these pages have something to offer for interested educators, students, and readers who believe that art can present a compelling, collaborative path forward.

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