A Public Praxis: A Conversation with Professor, Alexis Jemal

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List of Acronyms: GC=Graduate Center; PSC-CUNY= The Professional Staff Congress-City University of New York; NIH=National Institutes of Health; ACLU=American Civil Liberties Union; BIWOC=Black, Indigenous Women of Color

JA: Hello, listeners. Thank you for tuning into this PublicsLab Archival conversation. I'm Jess Applebaum, a former PublicsLab fellow, and co-editor of the PublicsLab Archive. I am also a doctoral candidate in the Theater & Performance program at the CUNY Graduate Center, which is sometimes called the Grad Center or simply the GC.

Our archive features audio interviews with student fellows, faculty mentors, grant recipients, and the program's leadership.

The following conversation is part of a series showcasing perspectives on public scholarship from the Faculty mentors of PublicsLab fellows. Mentors supported fellows along their individual journeys through the PublicsLab, advised them as they negotiated their "home" programs. Many also advocated for reform and renewal within their programs (and across the university), while championing public scholarship projects of their own.

In this conversation Alexis Jamal, associate professor at Silberman School of Social Work Hunter College, gives insights into the particular relationship and impact the field of Social Work has on public scholarship. Professor Jamal also speaks about her theory of critical consciousness and its application in the formation of courses centered on methodologies of public scholarship.

JA: Thank you so much for your time and for this conversation on PublicsLab and public scholarship. There are several strands that I would love for us to talk about, but first I thought we could begin with you orienting us to your relation and position within the Silberman School of Social Work and the Graduate Center.

AJ: Okay. So, my name is Alexis Jamal. I am an Associate Professor at Silverman School of Social Work, Hunter College. I am also on the doctoral faculty for, the PhD program in Social Welfare. And as another connection to just CUNY at large, I'm a recent graduate of the CUNY School of Professional Studies, the Master's in Applied Theater Program. That's probably my favorite degree.

And you mentioned how I got here...

JA: Yeah, how you got to, to your job at Hunter or your path with Social Work. Whatever you'd like to share with us would be wonderful.

AJ: Well, I don't wanna make this a long story, so let me try to think of the key aspects. When I graduated from undergrad, I went to law school because I wanted to be an advocate. I wanted to help people. I had majored in Sociology and International Studies and, Criminology and I thought I was headed toward the UN, but I decided that there are so many injustices within the United States that I should focus here.

And so, when I graduated from law school, I did a bunch of internships to figure out what I was going to do. One of them was at the Public Defender's Office and another at ACLU, and the Chambers of a Federal District Judge.

So, the Office of the Public Defender was the most helpful in figuring out that law was not for me. There's a whole story behind that, but I'm gonna skip over that and just say that I passed the bars in New Jersey and New York, so I became a lawyer. But I decided that I did not want to practice, and so I was looking for jobs and I found the Settlement Houses. And I was like, yes, this is it, this is kinda like the one stop shop to helping and to being of service. It was all there: education and community and justice and wellness. And so, I went on a few job interviews with the Settlement Houses, and they all said, "This looks great. Your resume looks great, but you should go to Social Work. You should go get a degree in Social Work."

And what's funny about that is that I had originally wanted to do that when I was in undergrad. But I was advised that a law degree is so much better than a degree in Social Work. So just forget about the Social Work and go do law. And so here I am coming back full circle.

And also, while I was looking for jobs, I found on Craigslist a doctoral student who was looking for a research assistant. And so, I interviewed with her and ended up talking about my dreams because I'll talk about my dreams to whoever will listen. And she told me that what it sounded like is that I should go to this [Center at Rutgers, the Rutgers Center for Behavioral Health Services and Criminal Justice Research](#).

So I did, I followed her advice, I looked it up and lo and behold the person who is the director of the center-- it was a P30 Center, so it was funded by [NIH](#)-- the director of the center was my advisor for an independent study during my senior year in college. And so she hires me as a research assistant, full-time.

And also, part of the funny story is that when these Settlement Houses told me to go do social work, I had applied to Hunter, and I got into Hunter. But when I got this job at Rutgers, I decided to apply to Rutgers because I would get tuition remission. So, I remember on April 30th, it was the last day to apply. I did. I got into Rutgers. Before I even knew I got in, I started taking summer courses to get a jumpstart on the studies.

During my first year in the program, in 2009, Rutgers started a joint degree program with the MSW and the PhD. And I went to talk to the chair of the program–again, telling her my dreams, and she said, you would be an awesome student. Well, she didn't say that, but basically that was the gist. You would be awesome for this new program, the joint degree program. You should apply. So, I did. And I was one of two students first admitted to this new joint degree program with the MSW PhD.

So, as I was, you know, working at this center, they did Participatory Action Research, they were testing interventions in the women's prison, specifically. And I

just fell in love with Intervention Research. I mean, this was a population I wanted to work with and Participatory Action Research, collaborating, being partners with those with lived experience, it just was world-defining for me.

And then being linked with my faculty mentor, [Lillian Windsor](). She was developing an intervention in critical consciousness for people who were recently released from incarceration. It was to reduce psychological distress, to reduce substance use, to reduce criminal re-offending, and to reduce HIV, STI risk behaviors. She was using community-based participatory research, though we had an advisory board, the Newark Community Collaborative Board, that was working together to develop the intervention and it was grounded in critical consciousness theory.

She hired me as her like project director. And so, I was just steeped in community-based participatory research and working with communities and academics and intervention design, and it was just fabulous. And I was introduced to critical consciousness. That set my trajectory to here because, as we were doing this intervention that was supposed to be grounded in critical consciousness, we're like, we don't even have a measure of critical consciousness. How are we gonna do this? So, she was like, do you wanna do that for your dissertation? I was like, "Sure, I could come up with a measure of critical consciousness. That seems pretty easy." It was not. But what did happen was that I was able to develop my own theory, *[transformative potential]()*, and come up with a scale, somewhat, for that.

Transformative potential started in my dissertation, and has been the foundation of all my work as far as like theory and intervention development. It's all grounded in transformative potential. And the theory has evolved over these past six years or so.

So yeah, so once I graduated, I went on the job market and landed here.

JA: Most of the humanities and social sciences connect with subjects and materials that eventually involve a form of public. And what you're sharing goes to an immediate relationship with the public. The area of Social Work is singular in its immediacy and the urgency to connect with social and political and communal aspects of life. And I'm wondering, as a field, and as a practitioner and a scholar, what do you think that your area or discipline has to offer scholars working in different areas of social sciences and humanities?

AJ: I think that Social Work is a natural bridge between working with people, and the academy, and scholarly efforts.

What Social Work can offer scholars in other disciplines is that kind of practice knowledge and on-the-ground organizing. Like, we have multiple methods and ways of working, right? It's not just the scientific method. We have skills in community organizing. We have skills in clinical practice. I think every team needs a social worker or a scholar of Social Work, because I think our work is naturally public facing. And our work is about bettering society, and transformation, and change. If the Sociologists and Anthropologists or Psychologists and the other social science fields are working to help people and help people live better lives or reach their goals or whatever it is, social workers will help produce that change.

JA: The connector and the hub specifically with the human, is one of the ways that I think your pedagogical practice aligns with PublicsLab. We as fellows were asked to center and to recognize and to cultivate our own critical consciousness and to develop and use that and to connect our radical imaginations with the social actions and our research.

And I was wondering what connections between the radical imagination, social action, and public scholarship lets us to start to expand public scholarship and think of it in anti-oppressive theories for action.

AJ: So, I see almost everything now through the lens of my theory. That's what theory does, right? It helps us think about things and explain things.

Critical Consciousness Theory first started out with levels of consciousness and levels of action. For consciousness, there was denial, blame and critical consciousness. And then for action, there was destructive action, avoidant action, and critical action. The goal is for everybody to continuously develop critical consciousness. And it's a lifelong process.

How the theory has evolved is that it's not enough to just be working toward critical consciousness. We also have to tap into radical imagination to be able to translate our consciousness into action so that our critical consciousness informs our critical action, and creates this cyclical process, which is what Friere called *praxis*, right? We need to be thinking, reflecting, doing, and then reflecting on that action, revising it, and trying again. And that's how we make progress. So now I'm gonna try to go back and remember your question. Can you give me direction again?

JA: Yes. I'm wondering how that then links up with the work of Public fellows who were brought together to identify our own consciousness and how that lends itself to the research we're doing and to the radical imagination and the public work that a typical PhD scholar might not get if they weren't interested in the publicness of scholarship, of research, of new knowledge.

And if it's helpful to maybe even ground it, you were a mentor to [Cameron Rasmussen](). And maybe it's easy to connect the relationship and the work that you were doing with him during his time within the fellowship, he was deep in development with [Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work]().

AJ: Yeah. Yeah. Let me just say that Cameron's an awesome and an excellent scholar and in many ways mentored me. [Laughs.] Especially with the Abolition Social Work perspective. It was very easy to be a mentor in that situation because I really just let Cameron do what Cameron does, what he was already working on. So, we had many generative conversations and I think that my work with him will fit into everything that I'm about to say.

So, as you were talking, I thought about three points. One is that my model is about self. In some of my work I've talked about how all of this starts with the self. I make a little joke in a paper that one of the editors didn't get and I had to explain it to them. But I kept the joke in there because I loved it so much. And it was like, investigation, inquiry, and I had all these other I-words. I say all these words start with I. So that means you need to start with yourself, right? Basically no one's hands are clean. We

all live in this oppressive system, oppressive, dehumanizing system. So, some of this work starts with the self and trying to develop your own critical consciousness.

My model now has five prongs, and so I'm always looking at myself on each of these prongs. The first prong is *affinity*, which is about relationship and community building. So whenever I interact now with people, be it my colleagues, professional interactions, personal interactions, I'm always trying to build that relationship. I never start a meeting without a check-in. You know, how are we doing as human beings?

The second prong is *awareness*, which is the critical consciousness piece. And that's where you become aware of your knowledge gaps. Right? There's a lot of stuff that I don't know, and there's a lot of stuff I don't know, I don't know.

And then the next aspect is accountability, which is: What's your role in the perpetuation of harm, and what's your part in the solution? Taking account of harm that I'm a part of and also thinking about how I am called upon to respond.

And then the next prong is *agency*, which is like the ability to respond, and capacity. And then the last prong is *action*. And when I'm doing my model in intervention form, I do these things called critical action project experiments to help people understand that it's all experimental.

We don't have to solve these problems overnight. They can't be solved overnight. We need, you know, planting seeds, ripples, getting out of this idea of perfectionism. We need to try something and see how it works and get information from that and then move forward. So that's a personal journey.

But then the next level is that you can, with public scholarship, you could help people on their journey build awareness, you could help with accountability, you could help with the experiments.

JA: You then developed a course during the time with PublicsLab that went into teaching public scholarship, and I'm interested in who the students were, what kind of projects or what kind of foundation you wanted to impart and to also receive from that new offering?

AJ: Yeah, so this course was actually my first-time teaching in the doctoral program, even though I've been on the doctoral faculty for a few years, I was mainly brought on the doctoral faculty because somebody wanted me on their dissertation committee. And I had never taught in the program before. And thank you to Barbara [Teater], who invited me to teach and gave me the opportunity to create a course.

So, there are about eight students in the class, all from the Social Welfare Program, except one who was from the Critical Psych Program. And I think the course went okay.

I'll tell you what was the challenge. I love experiential learning and project-based learning. But it's really hard to do a public scholarship project in a semester. So, I didn't ask the students to do that, but I think that they would've benefited if I could've figured out a way for them to have done a piece of something rather than reading about it.

One of the assignments was to visit two public scholarship type events, which I think was good, but I think you learn a lot from jumping in and just doing it.

I'm actually revising the course to be an intro course on Public Scholarship, Arts-Based Research, Intervention Research, and Participatory Action Research. Those are all the types of research that I think I do. And I would've liked to have had a nice intro to them as a doc student.

JA: What kind of tools were you, like the brass tack of what the course was, what kind of tools were you interested in giving doctoral students? And how did you define and frame public scholarship to begin with? As the introduction to the course?

AJ: Well, I really liked my course description: "This course introduces the topic and the methods for public scholarship and asks: How can we engage with and join communities of thinkers beyond the academy walls? How can we present findings from our creative, artistic, and scholarly work to public audiences? How can our research produce tools that can change perceptions and practices or challenge and reinterpret dominant sociocultural historical narratives in public spaces? How can our research have a real impact on people's lives and/or their lived experiences? Students will engage with interdisciplinary, didactic, and experiential learning opportunities to convert what is learned in class into public scholarship practice that will seek to capture the interest of the public in order to engage, entertain, influence, and inspire radical imagination and action to improve people's lives, health, and wellbeing."

So, I mean, this, this is why I do this work, right? To improve people's lives, health, and wellbeing. That's why I'm in this, and if this work doesn't do that, then I don't wanna do it.

JA: The word that stuck with me in the description of the course was "convert," which then I take to conversion, and that there's this necessary step that often isn't taken between research and scholarship, which is the conversion to the impact. And the impact that it has on oneself as a scholar and the impact that it's gonna have on the public or the subject or the theory that a PhD student is developing. And so, I'm wondering what, I think you've touched upon it before, but some of the methodologies for conversion that are so important to have, and as the techniques for public scholarship. I'm wondering if you could share a few aspects of that.

AJ: Yeah. That's one of my big things, I love converting theory into practice, right? I convert consciousness, into action theory, into practice. And I think the main idea is, is the experiment, is the, I love to think of universities and colleges as laboratories. I love the idea, the imagery of a laboratory, because just like scientists have the laboratories, the world is the social scientist laboratory.

So, I, I give you, an example from a recent study that I did. So how this works, right? Or how I think it works and it's supposed to work. As a Black woman teaching in a predominantly White institution. I've experienced some things, some hardships and I know I'm not the only one, right? There are difficulties, violence that is experienced, from students, from the system. I wanted to go on my own healing journey. So, the best way I thought I could go on my healing journey is if I made it into a research study.

So I did a [PSC CUNY application](#) to do a study about BIWOC – Black, Indigenous Women of Color – educators and predominantly White institutions, about their experiences and their healing paths. I had a team. And using my model, we created a curriculum and we recruited about 11 of us who met together once a week for 22 weeks, for two hours, going through this curriculum that we developed. And again, it was my model so there were sessions on affinity, sessions on awareness. Each prong.

And we got to the action step. And so now what are we gonna do? We collaboratively drafted another grant for the [Black Race Ethnic Studies Initiative](#) cause that came out around the same time we were in our action step. And we drafted three proposals, and one was funded: the [Space to Breathe Initiative](#). We were able to take physical space in the Silberman building and create it like a healing space for BIWOC, students, staff administrators, right? And we also have collaboratively submitted a publication, a manuscript for publication.

So, this research that stemmed from a personal experience, or personal experiences of mine and others, it's basically a feedback loop. Really. It's how these experiences shape your scholarship and then how your scholarship turns back around and shapes your life and your relationships and your community and has impact on all of that. And having this physical space be dedicated for healing changes the culture at Silberman, in ways.

JA: From that what advice would you give other faculty and members who are interested in creating similar projects or courses or opportunities to reimagine what higher ed can be and what these spaces of learning are.

AJ: Collaboration. I'm big on collaboration. Interdisciplinary, bringing together knowledges and ways of working. That's how you create new stuff, new ways. It's the experimentation. We can't be afraid to try. One of my joys right now is that I created another elective class for the [Social Work Master's Program](#). It's called Critical Social Work: Bridging the Micro/Macro Divide. And when I first created it, I was very early on in my Applied Theater program. With my two collaborators we revised the course to integrate Applied Theater. So, it became Critical Social Work: Bridging the Micro/Macro Divide with Applied Theater. Applied Theater is the modality through which we bridge the micro/macro divide and practice Critical Social Work.

There's so many, I'm gonna say rules, or things I did differently, with this class. For example, I don't wanna go through all of them, but we started a little bit before the semester started. I had two instructors co-facilitate with me. We had a very non-traditional format. Thanks to Silberman administration and my dean, we were allowed to have three-hour classes rather than two-hour classes. And it was project-based type learning. It broke the mold in so many ways and the students are the ones that made it happen. You know, I could design a course, but if no one's willing to do it, then it doesn't work.

So, yeah. So, I, I say as far as other people wanting to do it, I think teams–collaboration and partnerships. Diversity in skill sets, in knowledges and experiences. That's how you tap into radical imagination, because people bring different ideas and different ways of thinking and different ways of knowing, together.

JA: Thank you so much for your time. I'm gonna be thinking about the way that we as people shape scholarship and then that scholarship shapes us. And that, that there is this dynamic process that we can have that will affect the shapes and the forms and our abilities to articulate where and how research and scholarship are best served.

So, thank you so much for your time.

AJ: You're very welcome. Thank you for inviting me to the conversation.

JA: The PublicsLab was an initiative at the GC that supported the transformation of graduate education through fellowships for doctoral students, Curriculum Enhancement Grants for departments and programs, and programming for all that showcased and workshopped the methods and practices of public scholarship.

It was funded from 2018 to 2023 by the Mellon Foundation. Stacy Hartman was the Director of the program, Professor Bianca Williams served as its Faculty Lead, Professor Kandice Chuh Interim Faculty Lead, and Professor David Olan was the grant's principal investigator.

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