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On Trust and Power: a Final Interview with Bianca Williams and Stacy Hartman

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List of Acronyms: GC=Graduate Center

NB: Hello listeners. Thank you for tuning into this PublicsLab archival interview. I'm Nic Benacerraf, a former PublicsLab fellow and co-editor of the PublicsLab Archive. I am also a doctoral candidate in the [Theatre and Performance Program](#) at the [CUNY Graduate Center](#), which is sometimes called the Grad Center, or simply the GC.

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.

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

In this conversation, conducted in March of 2023, I speak with Director Stacy Hartman and Faculty Lead Bianca Williams, who share their visions of what they hoped PublicsLab could be, and reflect on the successes and challenges of the work accomplished. They offer context, and present possibilities and provocations towards radically re-imagining what a healthier culture for graduate education could be.

NB: It would be nice to hear in your own voices what your name is and what your role is in the PublicsLab.

BW: Sure. I'm Bianca Williams and I am a faculty member here, and Faculty Lead of the PublicsLab.

SH: And I'm Stacy Hartman and I am Director of the PublicsLab.

NB: Wonderful. So, what drew each of you to the PublicsLab in the first place, and why did you apply to your positions?

SH: So I had been working at the [Modern Language Association](#) on a project called [Connected Academics](#), which was another Mellon funded initiative that ran from 2015 to 2018, and it was focused on expanding career horizons, specifically for language and literature PhDs. So it was very much focused on careers, and it was very much focused on one specific field.

When that project concluded, I was really eager to continue that work, but differently. So, what I really loved about the PublicsLab project from the beginning was that , although careers, and careers outside of academia specifically were part of what we

were doing with folks, it was not the whole of the project. And there was this emphasis on public scholarship, which I see as very closely related to careers outside of academia, but not quite synonymous.

I also really liked that it was an interdisciplinary project. So I can move away from working solely with literature students and get to work with students from across the humanities and social sciences. That has been incredibly satisfying, and it has made me an even greater proponent of interdisciplinary work in graduate education.

And then I was really, *really* interested in coming to work at the Graduate Center, which has this amazing reputation as being this center of public scholarship, center of radical scholarship. And that is very much part of the vibrant fabric of intellectual life in New York City. So, I'd say those are the three things that really drew me to the PublicsLab.

BW: So what drew me to this position was, I had been hired as a faculty member here in the [Anthropology Department](#), and That was in my first year. And I was already in conversation with Joy Connolly about how we could change some of graduate education.

NB: She was the provost?

BW: Yes. Sorry. She was the provost. [Joy Connolly](#) was the provost. And we had already been in conversations about how to dream up and think bigger about graduate education across the country. And she had pulled together some faculty when I first got here to have a conversation about it. And then she got a really long email from me afterwards with all these thoughts.

(Laughs.) So that was one thing.

And then my chair, [Jeff Maskovski](#), was probably tired of hearing me complain about the things that needed to be changed in graduate education, and also knew I was very passionate about, doing public facing scholarship and saw the job announcement actually encouraged me to apply for it. So that's how I found out about the position, about the PublicsLab, about what the grant and the people who wrote the grant were imagining, and I got the position.

It was really exciting actually to do the interview because it made me sit down and finally put down on paper my re-imaginings of higher ed and the things that I was committed to. So equity and justice being a huge part of public facing work in higher ed, working with graduate students in a variety of different disciplines and doing interdisciplinary work. And then, I can't remember what the third thing was, but it had something to do with just dreaming , just experimentation, and being able to have space to rethink higher education.

SH: And I should just, I just want to add that Joy hired both of us.

BW: Right. Right.

SH: We did not know each other before coming to work together. I am very grateful to Joy for having made both those hires, I will say.

BW: I am very grateful also because I do think that our synergy around values and commitments and how we approach graduate education was a really big deal in how this all kind of played out.

And if there had been a contentious relationship or if we had had very different ideas of what graduate education should look like, it probably would've been a tough process. *[Laughs.]*

SH: Yeah. It would've been tough.

BW: We established a lot of trust with each other pretty quickly in the process.

NB: Yeah. There seems to be a lot of similarities and also a lot of complementarity. And I'm curious to get into, what you already started Bianca sharing about, what the potential of graduate education can be in a more experimental and generative way, transformative rather than potentially reproductive. And I'm curious to hear you speak more about that, both of you.

BW: Yeah. I mean, I think I experienced graduate education as very constraining, and feeling like I was being disciplined. I described it in my interview as I felt as though I was being pulled apart, like there were pieces of me that were being pulled apart and then told that they couldn't show up until I graduated.

And so for me, even though I had an amazing graduate committee, I had an amazing advisor. I went to Duke for undergrad and grad school. I had a pretty good experience, but the process of graduate education itself felt very-- I know people use the word violent. I don't know about that word, but it felt very tough. It was a hazing process that was very difficult.

And so, I wanted to have students experience that differently and that looked like freedom to be committed to, maybe, the political beliefs, the values, the intellectual curiosities that you came into grad school with, to be supported through that process and journey. And then to be trained to ask really good questions about the things that you are passionate about.

And so for me, like what is great about the possibility of graduate education is that kind of freeing up generative space for co-thinking and collaborative work, where people can experiment and use different tools to answer questions that are important to them. And then go out in the world and do something with it.

SH: Mm-hmm.

BW: For me, the application of it, whether it be in your own friend group at home -- you got this PhD and now you know how to answer questions for your family better -- or going to a foundation or to another university, or going to create amazing art -- using those tools, those critical thinking skills and tools, to do something in the world that makes the world just a little bit better and freer than it is.

SH: I totally agree with all of that. So, my origin story is figuring out in my third year of my PhD that I did not want to be a faculty member. I did want to finish my PhD and I went on to finish my PhD, but I did not want to be a faculty member.

So once you start to pull on that thread, of the idea that what we are here to do is train future faculty members, a whole bunch of things unravel very quickly, because it does move you away from this traditional reproductive model, which has very much been what PhD education in particular has been for many, many, many years, at least in the United States. And all of a sudden you have to think about what are we actually here for? What are the skills? What are the values? What are the ways of thinking and mindsets that we are trying to acculturate people into, to discipline people into?

And I think we're both really interested in this idea of these multifaceted way of thinking about discipline in graduate education, we have *the* disciplines, right? People are usually trained in *a* discipline, but discipline also exists as a *verb* in graduate education. And so the ways that people are disciplined into their disciplines really do start to change if you no longer assume that everyone is going to become a faculty member. Right?

And so it was pulling on that thread first for myself and then for other people that I think led me in this direction and helped me see that there were many, many, many other ways of thinking about graduate education that was not reproductive.

BW: So I think similarly, while Stacy was very clear she didn't want to be a faculty member, I was very clear that I did want to be one, but not the way I was being told that one had to be, right? I wanted to expand what it looked like to be a faculty member. And people usually say, oh, "a public intellectual," like that's the other alternative. But I thought that there was more room to do professorship or the professoriate in a different way. That looked like doing community-engaged work, that looked like, again, like being really honest about what my political commitments and beliefs were and doing work in that vein. I think that we've been successful in creating a space where graduate students can feel like that's a possibility, whether they want to go into higher ed or to the professoriate or not.

NB: To dig more into that, I wanted to ask you both, what is, do you think, the radical promise of public scholarship? After all you've seen, what feels that it resonates the loudest in terms of what a transformed world could feel like?

SH: I would say first of all, that like most radical promises, public scholarship was doomed to never quite achieve what it's trying to do.

But, Bianca, when you said public intellectual, I was like, we never talk about that. We never talk about that in, in that frame. Because it makes me think about Harold Bloom and that era of public intellectualism, and what we're thinking about is very different, right?

We're thinking about participatory research, research that is done *with* communities, *for* communities. That's mostly how we define public scholarship. I think for me, one of the radical promises of public scholarship is the chance to really remake higher ed in a way that is much more public and of much greater value to most people, and many more people than it has traditionally been. Universities are siloed. They're siloed internally, but they're also siloed externally a lot of the time. The Graduate Center is smack in the middle of New York City, but most graduate education happens on campuses which are often not integrated into the communities that they are part of.

For me, that's the radical promise: to rebuild some of the trust that has been eroded, or possibly never existed, between the academy and the publics that it should serve. And I think for public universities in particular, this is absolutely critical. We've seen this steady decline of support for higher ed, both financially, but also people don't trust it anymore. And so what would it take to rebuild some of that trust and rebuild that relationship? I think public scholarship has to be a critical part of that.

BW: I – I hesitate at this word radical. *[Laughs.]* I hesitate at this word radical, and I'm trying to figure out how to articulate why, maybe because it feels too big. But I think we need a too-big solution, a variety of too-big solutions to fix what's happening in higher ed. I think for me, going back to the idea of a public intellectual, I hesitate at that because in this moment with television and media and the internet, public intellectuals are oftentimes viewed as talking heads, and I didn't want to be that. I didn't want to be someone who felt very disconnected and just brought in to give thoughts.

What I did understand and really value was that there were public intellectuals from the sixties and seventies trained in Gender Studies, trained in Africana Studies who were very deeply committed, and involved, and embedded, and came from, communities -- whatever those publics and communities may be. Right? So folks who did community organizing, folks who understood that their position in this space of higher ed was to break down the walls, facilitate, act as a hand reaching out and keeping in marginalized folks who were on the margins of higher ed.

And so I guess I'm just saying that I feel like the promise of higher ed, at least for folks I come from, has always been let's come in here and take the resources and do with it what we can and let's try to make the world better, freer, less oppressive for the folks who oftentimes don't have access to this space. Let's use those resources. Let's teach and try to free our minds and teach alternative histories or alternative realities, and then see what we can build from that.

These are promises that were already fulfilled. That's how I got here, right? Those people did that work and then passed on the torch. And so the promise was fulfilled, but there's so much more work to do. And so I think the way, I think about it is that I'm just doing my little piece and trying to open it and free it up for the next generations, however long I should be present.

SH: I would also add to that, that part of the radical – if we're going to call it a radical promise of public scholarship – is making the work of equity for example, central to what the university is trying to do, rather than allowing it to happen on the margins and kind of turning a blind eye.

And that means wrestling with all of the many ways that universities are deeply inequitable places, and have been, and have long histories of being built through slavery, being built through money that was earned in deeply unethical ways, which is true even for the funding that we received from the [Mellon Foundation](#). It means wrestling with the relationship between land grant universities and the fact that all of the land that they're on is stolen from indigenous people. It means wrestling with all of those histories and not reverting to this like golden age narrative, in which we're all just trying to get back to the 1960s, which was the last time there were enough academic jobs to go around for everyone who wanted one.

And so there's no return happening, right? We're all just building it forward and trying to put that work at the center of what the university does rather than at the margins.

NB: I'm hearing that there's this cumulative dimension to it and also that there's this timeless dimension to it that you were articulating Bianca, in the sense that this work has been happening. The promise has been continuing, and maybe part of it is that we haven't respected and honored that work enough and resourced it. One of the things that this program has done is put a lot of money behind that, and even also other kinds of celebration.

So, I'd like to also ask about, you know, you started touching on this, Stacy, what is the relationship between public scholarship and efforts towards racial and social justice in society?

BW: So I was going to say, I think your point that there have been these long histories of folks doing some of the work that we've been trying to do right here, whether it is through program building, institution building, but also through their own theoretical, intellectual work. To me, it's always been present. It's whether or not we have valued it, it's whether or not we have paid attention to it, and also listened to it.

Because the folks doing that work, and the work that has come out of that kind of collaborative, anti-racist, feminist kind of anti-oppressive work, have always had solutions. I think a lot of people think it's complaint and critique, but usually within those things, our solutions for how to build something new, and whether or not we got resources or time or space to do them is something different.

So when I came to the PublicsLab, part of what I really was hopeful for, and I think that we have tried to do, is really embed ourselves in some of the practices and thought that came out of Black Feminist praxis, and that community-based praxis of Black Studies of centering folks' real lives, allowing them to do the work that they want to do, trying to value them wanting to make change in the world, and then giving them the intellectual tools to do so, and analytical tools to do so.

I think that relationship between higher ed, public scholarship, and equity and justice is really, really important. A lot of the change that we see, at least in this country, over the past few decades, oftentimes higher ed and public scholarships played a huge role in that. And again, not just words on the page, which are very much important, but the relationships that are built in doing that work.

I think these things should be deeply connected, and I don't think higher ed is doing its job when they're not deeply connected.

SH: And I'll just add to that, one of the things that we study in the humanities, maybe the core thing that we study in the humanities, is power. And thinking about how power functions in various ways, across various paradigms. How power has functioned in the past.

There's something really powerful about turning that lens on the academy itself. And I do think that if you're gonna do public scholarship, in a way that is not apolitical to the point of hollowing out everything that it can and should mean, you have to attend to the way that power functions in the university, but also in the larger ecosystem that

every university is a part of. And you have to be prepared to have that be deeply uncomfortable at times. *[Laughs.]* And you have to be prepared also for yourself and the work and the university to be transformed by it.

And I think it's where these things are no longer happening on the margin when they're trying to be brought into the center, that's where you do tend to see resistance. Because those structures of power do not bend easily.

BW: There are time periods where it was possible to be a graduate student and not be aware of the political economy of what you're situated in. And that time has passed. Like it's really difficult to be a graduate student regardless of how many resources or prestige your university may have, or whatever those things are that people think are really important.

In this moment, it is impossible to be training to be a doctoral student and not be aware of what's happening to you around you, et cetera. And so I think we are in a moment where graduate education, higher ed more broadly, but graduate education has to figure out how to make itself relevant and useful in this moment.

A lot of folks, again, trained in the interdisciplinary spaces, spaces that are oftentimes put on the margins, that's what we are given tools to do, is to ask the really critical questions to ask how power operates. And oftentimes people get really uncomfortable when we turn it onto the processes that are trying to discipline us out of those questions.

They want the lenses to be used out there and never in here. And there's this idea that teaching and pedagogy and research happen in here, but the organizing and the put into practice happens out there. And that's something that I think we were very intentional of trying to kind of trouble and blur in the PublicsLab. That all of it is happening everywhere, and it should be. Critical thinking should be happening everywhere. So how do we communicate it in a variety of ways? How do we use it in a variety of ways? That's what I think our work has been trying to do.

NB: I'm curious to identify some of those other barriers in the university systems, in our university, and academia in general, that make this work harder, that we need to unravel and confront.

SH: I'm gonna say something really mundane, which is that university bureaucracy is a huge barrier.

Some of this is a resource transfer. Like some of this has to be a resource transfer, and it is very hard to transfer resources outside the university. Bureaucratic roadblocks are going to vary everywhere. Every institution I've ever been at or interacted with has had a different version of it.

Okay, this is one example, that is if not universal then is at least true at every place that I have encountered. It is almost impossible to pay students out of normal university funds – and this is true for private universities and public universities – to do internships at external organizations. There's a number of roadblocks. Some of them I think are internal to universities. Some of them, especially at public universities, might be state laws. I know for international students, there are federal

laws at work. It's a very complex bureaucracy that in most places has made this almost impossible.

And much less when you're talking about actually transferring resources to other organizations that you might be collaborating with. If it's not made impossible, then it's made very, very slow. And it makes us less desirable partners. It makes us look flaky, and untrustworthy, and like we don't have our act together. And it really damages relationships in their infancy if we can't do that sort of thing. Because you can't talk about reparative work, you can't talk about equity, without talking about actual resources and being able to transfer those.

BW: I'm having a, like a long list of barriers. I'm trying to pick the top two. *[Laughs.]*

NB: Go for it!

SH: The administrator immediately went for the bureaucracy.

BW: No, because I think connected is *time*. When I think about the folks who fulfilled this previous generations of the radical promise, so often they were doing what was counted as their scholarship and everything else on top, right? And so the mentoring, the institution-building, the leadership, the things that actually make these institutions feel welcoming to folks who are marginalized, was always "and", right? It was the plus. It was a thing that people were like, *oh, you do that as your hobby*. Like we have time to have academic hobbies like that. And I think that still continues.

Like, I co-edited [this book on plantation politics](#) and in that book, thinking about campus rebellions, and what happens in those moments of crises, is the amount of labor that faculty and staff and students put into trying to create institutions that feel less harmful -- a barrier to that is time. We don't have time to do all this work. All the stuff that universities claim to be in their mission statements, their aspirational goals require time and money. And they don't put that money, or their time, or the valuing of that time, where their mouth is.

To make classrooms more equitable, to make faculty meetings more equitable, for people to listen to unions, all that stuff requires relationship building. It requires building of trust, and that is time. When you're looking at how people get promoted, when you're looking at how people earn PhDs, those things, the things that require that work, those things are not being valued.

SH: So, two others. And these are so fundamental to the way that we have structured ourselves in higher ed, that I sometimes get myself in hot water when I talk about them a little bit. Because one is tenure, and one is discipline-based knowledge organization, and like discipline-based teaching and research. So I'll start with tenure. I have a real bone to pick with tenure, which like has promised things like academic freedom and faculty governance, and I feel doesn't really deliver on them. Ask folks in Florida how protected by tenure they feel right now.

I don't know that it delivers on the things that it is supposed to deliver on, and it's gatekeeping. It's such a gatekeeping process and it's meant to be. It's meant to be a gatekeeping process, but it is not equitable in who it keeps out and who it allows in. And it forces people to do a certain type of work until they're years into their career.

People put off public scholarship. People put off interdisciplinary work. People put off collaborative work, which is critical. But meanwhile, you're being disciplined, by a process that is deeply coercive into doing a particular type of scholarship that the academy does value. And people are punished for work that is too accessible. It happens all the time. People are punished for work that is too accessible.

And then the disciplines. The big questions that we are all facing are not discipline-based. And no one outside the academy cares about our disciplines. I'm sorry. It's true. No one cares.

BW: That's terrible news.

SH: *[Laughs.]* So, in some ways I think disciplinary training is really valuable and you get that deep understanding of how to approach a problem. I'm trained as a literary scholar, Bianca's trained as an anthropologist. These are very different ways, and I think that we've learned a lot from each other over the years. But we don't always acknowledge the ways in which the disciplines also limit our thinking and place a lot of parameters on what types of questions can be asked, and how we can approach them. And it also means that interdisciplinary work is often not valued and not rewarded, when the fact of the matter is that most public facing work requires interdisciplinary thinking.

BW: If you're listening to this recording 50 years from now in some archive, know that has been very difficult for me to be quiet and not have a conversation with Stacy, and not engage in real dialogic conversation with Nic and Stacy. It's part of how I'm trained and how I work.

I just have two more things and one is trusting graduate students. So this kind of infantilizing that she's talking about, or trying to tell graduate students that they don't know anything while they're learning to do all these things that they're supposed to be experts in.

But trusting graduate students to have real, worthy life experiences and real thoughts about how they wanna do the work, whether it be methods, whether it be whatever the product is. I think that's part of what happens. The kind of faculty student relationship or the advisor/advisee relationship, how that is taught is one of the barriers of change in higher ed. I think trusting graduate students, and feeling like they should be included in how their process goes, that should be a thing. It sounds basic, but it really isn't.

And then the last thing is alignment of department missions with their curricula and with how they're asking graduate students to demonstrate what they've learned – or expertise, or whatever the word may be.

For example, Stacy always says *it's free to change your curriculum*, right? It takes time. Someone probably has to buy out courses for that to be done, or whatever, but it doesn't cost a ton of money to change your curriculum. And that's the thing that really will change the *feel* of the department and also how people are trained in that department to be part of higher ed and be part of that discipline.

And yet, if you join any faculty meeting where people are talking about the intro courses, *that* is with the hot button, like where everybody's biases and everybody's training and everybody's thought about what's canon and what's not comes out. Where the power dynamics and mechanisms of the department come out are in the conversations around curriculum. Do they have to write a dissertation? Can they do a digital dissertation? Can they perform a play as their final product? All these ideas of what knowledge should be and what it should look like tells you where the power dynamics and oppressive things are operating. And so if you really try hard to put into alignment the department's mission with the curricula, with the requirements of the graduate education, with whatever that final product is, you will see: everything will become unmarked very quickly.

And people's political commitments will become unmarked really quickly. And I think people get really uncomfortable in that moment. And so a barrier is, like, us pretending that those things are not political and not having open conversations about those things.

NB: Because you mentioned earlier that graduate students have no choice but to confront the political and economic realities of being in this system. And it's not necessarily the case for tenured faculty members. And so, I'm hearing from you both that there's a lot of work to be done inside departments about curriculum, and also what we think of as the work of the university, the work of scholarship, the work of the professor – and maybe loosening not only what a dissertation can look like, but also what counts as tenure-valuable work.

BW: Correct. I don't know if you want me to say more but correct. *[Laughs.]*

NB: I'd love to start talking about how you all crafted the PublicsLab programs. And I wanted to start by asking about the fellowship program, which I got to be a part of. As a PublicsLab fellow, we were guided through all sorts of workshops and collaborations and knowledge sharings, readings, generative activities, critical conversations, and even professional experiences. It was both intimate and nourishing, even despite the COVID pandemic that fell smack dab in the middle. But how did you go about structuring the fellowship? What did you have in mind and what feels relevant to share with other people who might try this in the future?

BW: We're laughing. *[They laugh.]*

I'm laughing. I won't speak for Stacy. I'm laughing because I feel like there was a lot of experimentation, which I actually really appreciated. Because we, when we were hired, they were like: *here, run with it*. Like, the PublicsLab is not actually a physical space, like it's not a center or anything, so we had to figure out how to build a container for the experience that we imagined. But we were also very clear that we wanted the students to have a lot of say and do in what that experience looked like.

We tried all of those things that you named to gather information about what students wanted and what they needed, and then used our expertise to listen to some of the things that maybe weren't stated, or that were absent, or could help.

I know for me it, I was very committed to, again, centering y'all's lives so that you could figure out how to connect your research to what you wanted to actually do and how you wanted to live. I didn't want y'all to feel like those things were disconnected.

We spent a lot of time figuring out who else we needed to bring into rooms to help you all with your different journeys. So we spent a lot of time thinking about practitioners who would be helpful, how to connect you all with particular organizations that would be helpful.

It was a lot of experimentation, and I don't know that we *named* it, but we very quickly got to the place where equity and justice had to be central to not only what we were doing, but how we were doing it. I know we weren't always successful, but I think we tried really hard to make room for that and to mark it, instead of just doing it and not speaking it into the room. We tried to repeatedly speak that into the room for you all.

And then my word of *dreaming*. I really wanted us to have the flexibility and time to just dream up something different.

SH: And I think the equity piece, it's so central to the work that you've done, Bianca, but also the students pushed that. The work that you all did -- I'm looking at Nic now -- I'd say 90% of it was focused on justice and equity. I think we were laughing because a lot of it was made up as we went along. If we're totally honest, a lot of it was invented on the fly.

At least, this was the way I thought of it: graduate education is not student-centered on the whole. It is not student-centered. Many departments have no actual curriculum to speak of at all other than what the faculty members are interested in at any given moment. We wanted to think about a graduate education that was student-centered, that would put students' lives and students' wellbeing and their interests at the core of what we were doing.

And what we discovered was, first of all, that was a little anxiety inducing for people. I remember we got a lot of questions that first semester, like, *okay, but what are the expectations*, right? Like, *what do I have to do in order to keep my fellowship?* Because people's livelihood were tied to this, and so I think the fact that we didn't have a syllabus that first semester, I think was a little bit tough for people at times. But we very much wanted it to be this an experimental generative space, where people could share skills, where people could bring challenges, where people could explore things that they weren't gonna be able to explore in their programs.

Also, again, the students really pushed us. So we had an internship requirement, for example. Coming from career services, I had a particular idea of what an internship was. I think you and I had a conversation really early on, Nic, where we had made you the offer and you were trying to decide whether you were gonna do it. And you came into my office, and you basically said, *I've done a lot of internships. I don't want to do another internship the way that we usually think of them*. But you had projects that you were working on, in various ways, and you basically said, *I want to be able to do the work that I'm already doing, that really matters to me, and I wanna do it under the umbrella of the PublicsLab*.

And over time people really pushed at that internship label. People started organizations. People did really intensive project-work. People do all sorts of different things. And we just kept loosening the reins and loosening the reins and loosening the reins, and trusting that you all knew what you were doing. And I think that *trust* -- I think the fellows really fulfilled their end of that -- I think that trust was really at the center of what we do. And it goes back to this idea of treating graduate students, like experts in their own professional and intellectual development.

BW: And listening and learning from them.

SH: Yes.

BW: I think Stacy and I learned quite a bit from you. And we tried our best to push against structural and institutional things that would limit you all being able to do what you wanted to do.

SH: Yes.

NB: And I think you were also so transparent through the process that this first fellowship class was going to be a learning process for the whole PublicsLab. And what a gift it was, I think, to be able to learn alongside you what the PublicsLab wanted to become. Because it's also upsetting this traditional model of knowing exactly what needs to happen and having a plan, and not really taking the time to stop and ask what is productive and useful. And students seem to have a very clear sense of how they could use this extra time. Mm-hmm. But also, what is healthy. And I'm brought back to you, Bianca, repeatedly -- I don't know exactly if I'm gonna get the question right, but -- *What would it look like if the students' health was the most important thing?*

BW: Yeah, I was just thinking, in my notes to apply for this job, my guiding question was, *What would graduate education or higher ed look like if emotional wellness was central to that?* Because we already know that there's like a mental health and illness epidemic in graduate education. And it doesn't stop. Like, when you become faculty, if you become faculty, it also continues. So there's something about this environment that really fuels, and makes it difficult, to be emotionally well, and I felt very strongly that I wanted to figure out what the answer to that question was.

And I will say, I'll name *facilitation*. Like I think Stacy and I are really good facilitators. We do it differently. The students are really good facilitators in a variety of ways. And that facilitation doesn't happen in a lot of kind of traditional graduate education. We keep talking about like listening and exchange and collaboration. Facilitation is really important to that process. And it's a skill that takes work. Not everyone can do it. And I think we all tried to learn to figure out how to do that, whether it was facilitating different relationships with community folks and doing research in that way.

A lot of people spent intentional time thinking about like, how do I use my privilege as a graduate student and do this work in a way that doesn't feel terrible? Being held accountable to the community that I'm doing work with. Even in our seminar meetings or in the meetings that we have with one another, we really try to be intentional about facilitation. And Stacy's really good at making sure we have an agenda beforehand, but we're thinking about, not like the points on it, but like how to

facilitate the transitions from this thing to this thing, so it feels good, right? I think facilitation is really important and sometimes not seen as important in other spaces.

NB: And because there's this idea of knowledge-giving and transference, which is known already.

SH: The traditional graduate seminar is three hours. And most of it is the faculty member talking. It's a cliché, but it's a cliché for a reason. Obviously, there's a lot of classes now that do not look anything like that, but I am always surprised when I encounter, I still encounter that model. I came out of language-teaching, and I was taught to teach in a way where out of a 50-minute class, the students were supposed to talk for 40 of them. And I have carried that into my facilitation, the way that I facilitate things now.

BW: Facilitation also requires people to give up power. That's why it's so difficult for some people. You have to give up power to facilitate well.

SH: Yes. Yes.

BW: Everyone in the room is supposed to be listened to and seen, and recognized. And so facilitation's really difficult for folks who wanna hold onto control. Yeah. Even though the facilitator usually is holding the container, like you have to be able to give some of that up. And you have to be able to be okay with wherever it may go. And you're not in control of that.

NB: Thank you so much. I want to talk also about the other programs that you have brought into the Graduate Center. You've brought a lot of pioneering guests to speak here, and to the larger public as well, when we were able to invite them. One of the first manifestations of this was a series called [*Agency and Care: The Power of Black Women Reading*](#), which was a series in the fall of 2019, organized by you, Bianca. It featured individual events and workshops by [Glory Edim](#), [Alexis Pauline Gumbs](#), [Christen Smith](#) and [Jamia Wilson](#), as well as a panel discussion with all of those people, that you moderated.

And I was curious what was on your mind when you were organizing this? These are all Black women; what does the academy have to learn from Black feminist thinkers, and makers, and doers?

BW: Mm-hmm. Yeah, these were all Black women and Black feminists who I knew were in these different industries. So, they weren't all faculty members. They were folks who were really great thinkers and relationship-builders in their different industries, whether it be publishing--. Alexis is an author and an independent scholar. And Christen is a professor. And Glory did an amazing job creating this national, and now international, digital and physical book club. These were all people who I knew really enjoyed talking about Black women's writing, and I knew I wanted the students to be able to see critical thinking an intellectual curiosity in a variety of manifestations, with folks who were grounded in Black feminist praxis.

I think we had really amazing conversations with all of them, whether it was in the group conversation or individually. And I wanted to do a conference differently. Like I just wanted it to feel more intimate and feel like students were able to learn from the folks that we were bringing in and there was this kind of back and forth. So that's

what *Agency and Care* was about, like how does Black women's writing motivate us to move, and how do the ways that they care for one another allow us to understand the world differently and experience it differently? And I wanted the shape of that event to embody that.

Stacy did a ton of work. Again, thinking about time and resources, I wouldn't have been able to pull that all together if Stacy didn't have a full-time job that helped her do something like, you know, like we worked really closely--

SH: And [Justin](#), our Program Assistant.

BW: Right. – to pull that together. I wouldn't have been able to make that happen. And it's one of the few times that I remember seeing an audience of like a hundred people that were mostly Black folks at the GC. I know that's like a thing that's not supposed to be said. [*Laughs.*] But you know, the Graduate Center is a very racially diverse space, relative to some other spaces, but as a Black woman scholar, when I walk in this building, that's not what I experienced regularly. And so, I remember that night looking at the room and being like, *oh my gosh, I've never seen this here*. It felt really good for the PublicsLab to be attached to that, and to make that space possible. And I've gone on to build on that work and hope that there will be future iterations of it. And I hope the students got a lot from that experience.

NB: Stacy, I'm also curious, when you're thinking about this program and other folks that you've brought in for workshops and panels, what sticks out to you the most as what was meaningful?

SH: Oh, goodness. So I feel like this was such a great event, and we didn't ever do anything quite like it again, partly because Covid intervened, right? And that would not have worked online. We needed the sort of intimacy of the in-person event for that to be what you wanted it to be.

The last two years we have had a student programming committee that has set the agenda for most of our programming. Occasionally I have something that I want to do, but mostly the student programming committee has set that agenda. And the reason that we did that was that we got feedback in the third year of the program. That students did not feel that we were centering racial equity in particular, as much as I at least thought that we were doing. And this required sort of a rethinking of how we were approaching our, in particular, our career-focused programming.

And the thing that emerged was that *I* was doing most of this programming. I was driving most of our programming and I'm a white woman, I'm a white administrator. My career has looked a particular way. My ideas about professionalism are rooted in the fact that I am a white woman. So we set out to form this committee, which is paid, in a way that would decenter my experience and center the experiences of other people.

The first year it was entirely fellows who sat on that committee, and this year I think we have no fellows on the committee, at this point. And I think that has really shifted our programming in really interesting ways. It has certainly shifted it away from what I would consider professional development and towards – I don't wanna set up a false dichotomy here, between professional development and activism – but the

programming has become increasingly more activist in nature, which I think is really interesting.

You know, we had this event last year on libraries, and if I had done this event, I probably would've called it, "Careers in Libraries" or something like that. And we would've had a couple dozen people, and it would've been fine. But the programming committee, in particular Maddie Barnes, the fellow who came up with this particular event, called it [*Social Justice Work in Libraries*](#).

There's a ton of social justice work that takes place in libraries it turns out, which is not surprising because librarians are amazing. And so, we had folks from a couple different institutions including the GC, including the [Morgan](#), who came and talked about the work that they do in things like "critical catalog," or "open educational resources". We had 80, 90 people on a Zoom call for this event. And it was a much better event than I would've ever conceived of on my own. And so for me, that's what sticks out to me.

If you give resources to graduate students and say, *run with it*, folks run with it! And they come up with all sorts of really interesting generative ideas that are hard to conceive of, I think, under traditional structures in the university.

BW: And what we've learned is there's a lot of assumptions that doing racial equity work is about diversity. Like if you just diversify the folks that are present, and you have the entire rainbow present, and all the people with, all their identities – then it will magically be equitable, or justice-based, or whatever the word is you want to use.

I think what we keep trying to strive for or get at, is that actually if you have different people present, and are paying attention to diversity, whatever that may mean, then the analysis of *power* -- showing how power is present -- is what will be there. And so yes, we would've had a great program if it was your program of librarians, *and* by having people who were differently positioned at the PublicsLab, imagine that program, they were able to see different things that we may have missed based on our positionalities. Then you've got a program about social justice in the library.

Yes, the people are important. Like, all the different positionalities are important, but what the different positionalities allow you to see and get when they collaborate together is actually like what public scholarships should look like, or what graduate education should look like.

The other small thing, but important thing I'll say is that most of the folks that we come into contact with are really kind. I don't know what it is. I don't, maybe it's me and Stacy, I don't know, but the fellows are generally kind to one another. We try to be kind to one another. The practitioners we brought in have been generous and kind. When people see that you're trying to do work in a particular way, and understand your mission, and maybe align with it, there is a kindness there. And so when I think about that first event, the folks who we brought in, were really touched by the space that was created, and what they learned from one another, and the intention that we put and even bringing them and having them here.

It allowed a certain type of generosity and kindness to be present. And I think that is very rare in higher ed, and it shouldn't be.

NB: Bianca, you've developed a practice of reading a *positionality statement* on the first day of your class as a teacher, a practice that you detail in your essay, "[Radical Honesty](#)". This statement seems to be designed to situate your identities and dispositions in relationship to the content of the course, so that students can more readily be aware of the relationship between content and the way it's taught. You've also guided fellows in the practice of naming our publics and naming the groups to which we hold our actions accountable. What's the value of all these acts of *naming*, and how does naming help us in the work of creating more caring and healthy spaces?

BW: Yeah. Thank you for that question. I think a lot of the things that feel -- again, I don't know what the appropriate word is -- *harmful* or *violent* or *oppressive* to me in higher ed, come in silence. There's not spaces to talk about it or spaces to name it, or you're like, something's happening to you and you're just like, *What's happening? Am I the only one that's happening to?* And so I committed to -- when I became a faculty member, I had some type of power, or some say over how I taught and how I engage in relationships, in mentoring and advising relationships with students -- that I wanted to make room for them to be able to name the things that were happening. And name like their analysis and be able to be honest about all, not only the content of what they were creating, but the processes and what was happening to them in the processes.

Again, thinking about facilitation, thinking about my training in Black feminist praxis, thinking about doing public scholarship and trying to engage publics, wherever or whatever that may be, that requires you to name what is that play like what you're bringing to the table, what each of you are getting out of whatever you're collaborating with together.

Just speaking to and marking what sometimes feels really elusive. Oppression can feel very powerful, but it can be elusive and it's hard to articulate sometimes. And so I am very committed to using radical honesty as my kind of Black feminist pedagogical approach, naming what's happening in the classroom, naming what we bring, and naming what the texts and the things that we're doing, what it makes us feel.

Our space feels differently. And I think it's because we are not only aware of the things that are operating, but we speak them. And so students are able to decide whether or not that's their experience or they have something different. But they're able to speak the things that you're oftentimes told to keep to yourself, or keep outside of higher ed or graduate education. We try to tell people to bring those things in.

SH: Yeah, and I will just add that part of my own journey through the PublicsLab has been in trying to articulate for myself and just think through the ways in which my whiteness shows up in my work, which has been a deeply uncomfortable process at various points.

BW: I was about to say, all of this is uncomfortable. *[Laughs.]*

SH: It's so uncomfortable. It's so uncomfortable. And white people are taught like almost explicitly to, like, elide their whiteness in every way, right? And so to talk about it feels transgressive. But at the same time, you can't ignore the fact that administrators at many universities are white. It is a profession that is dominated in particular by white women. I have come to conclude it's because of the way power and caretaking intersect in those roles. And white women are socialized to take care of people, to

smooth things over, and just make everyone as comfortable as possible most of the time.

But also, it is often in our best interest to maintain the status quo of power in an institution.

BW: Racialized power.

SH: Yeah. Racialized power. Yes, exactly. Specifically racialized power. I have to go back to the statistic, like over 50% of white women voted for Trump. But there was a spectrum. Married white women voted for Trump in very large numbers; widowed white women in lower numbers; divorced white women in lower numbers still; and then unmarried white women mostly did not vote for Trump. So, it's like this proximity to the center of power, and self-interest, right?

And so anyway, I have learned so much through my time at the PublicsLab. And I just want to appreciate you, Bianca, for the amount of grace you have given me in particular moments. *[Laughs.]* It has been for me a way of rethinking my own positionality and the ways in which that positionality affects my work that I very much hope I will continue as I move into the next phase of what I do.

BW: Thank you for that, Stacy.

Yeah, I was gonna say, when you were asking me about radical honesty, I was like, *Stacy just did it in the previous answer!* Because I think it's a practice and it is deeply uncomfortable. And I think sometimes what makes me annoyed in higher ed or in the academy around it is that people think it comes with my identity, right? But it actually comes from my training, and it comes from my participation in movement spaces. There are tools in a variety of spaces and a lot of that kind of practice, and grace, and translation, and facilitation comes from organizing practice.

The other thing I wanna name, and Stacy and I are still trying to figure out how to write through this and think through this, is that I think for, especially in that first year, for some of the students of color who came to the PublicsLab, not the fellowship, but the *programming*, expected a particular type of thing. They expected a kind of movement space, or maybe a more Black-centered space, and felt maybe not marginalized, but not comfortable or like this wasn't their space. And they were trying to figure out like what was happening. And I think some of it is they expected like something from me and something from Stacy and trying to figure out like, *what is operating here?*

And so there was this period of like me trying to make sense of what is possible in this space and what isn't possible in this space? What does the resources that we have allow us to do and what's not possible? And I think I spent a lot of time figuring out, what are the radical possibilities in higher ed? What are the radical possibilities of the PublicsLab? And recognizing that some of them couldn't be here, and being okay with that. Like, being okay with it. This is what I can do, and this is what I can do.

So I think we both went through a process in that first year and maybe continued to do so, but figuring out like, *who am I and what does this space need of me and what can I contribute and what maybe is not like, what doesn't fit here, or what do I need to*

change and learn about myself to be able to do this work? I think we both went through some of that.

And I think some students I know had a really hard time with that first year and feeling like they wanted more from us. Particularly me. And I would be like, *this space wasn't made for that. You have to know what the space is made for.*

NB: Thanks, both of you, for the transparency that you've offered throughout this interview. And as this interview comes to a close, and as the PublicsLab comes to a close, I wanted to end by asking you what you're gonna miss the most, and what you're really proud of.

BW: Oh, I'm so sad.

NB: Either one of those things that feels right, right now.

SH: I'm gonna miss the people. I am just, I'm gonna miss the fellows. I already missed the fellows who've left, like I talked to Daniel like every two months. I can't let him go. I'm going to miss, I'm gonna miss working with you *so* much. And I hope that we find other ways to work together. I was just pointing at Bianca, for the auditory medium.

As for what I'm really proud of, I think we've built something that is really unusual in the academy. You know, I feel like we have built this community of folks who care deeply and in so many ways, about each other, about the world, about what they're going to do. And the thing that I'm looking forward to is seeing where people go afterwards, and seeing what people do afterwards. Because I just, I think it's going to be amazing. And I hope that I'm able to stay in connection with people as they move through their careers and as they move into the next phases of their lives. Because I think it's just gonna be, it's gonna be incredible.

BW: Yeah. I mean, she articulated my answer. It's the people. And it's what the people make the space feel like. Like, I really enjoy co-thinking with y'all. I really enjoy people saying, *this is the problem I'm having in my research. How can you help me?* Like how can we as a group think through this issue? I feel like there was so much good thinking out loud, and it felt good. I'm going to miss that. For me, the PublicsLab allowed me to do my faculty work, and have a space that understood how I would want to do this work all the time.

It's just centered and anchored me, and anchored my other work in other spaces. So the PublicsLab was really the guide for me over the past few years. I'm gonna miss that. And I'm not sure it's gonna be able to be created in other parts.

It's a moment in time, with a particular group of people, and I'm going to miss that.

NB: The PublicsLab was an initiative at the GC that supported the transformation of graduate education for the public good.

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