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## **To Whom Are You Accountable? A Conversation with PublicsLab Fellows, Mica Baum-Tuccillo and Nic Benacerraf**

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**Interviewee:** Mica Baum-Tuccillo (MBT)  
**Interviewee:** Nic Benacerraf (NB)  
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**List of Acronyms:** GC=Graduate Center; LMSU=Licensed Master Social Worker; Stacy=Stacy Hartman, director of PublicsLab; Bianca=Bianca Williams, Faculty Lead of PublicsLab; Kandice=Kandice Chuh, Interim Faculty Lead of PublicsLab;

**JA:** Hello, listeners. Thank you for tuning in to this PublicsLab archival interview. I'm [Jess Applebaum](#), a former PublicsLab fellow and co-editor of the PublicsLab Archive. I'm 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 following conversation is part of a series showcasing perspectives of PublicsLab fellows. Fellowships were awarded for two- or three-year periods. During the first year, fellows met once a week with their cohort, where they developed their own understanding of public scholarship through a series of talks, workshops, and assignments curated by Director [Stacy Hartman](#) and Faculty Leads [Bianca Williams](#) and [Kandice Chuh](#). During the second year, fellows initiated programs and internships which connected them to publics inside and outside the walls of the GC.

In this conversation [Mica Baum-Tuccillo](#) and [Nic Benacerraf](#) talk about how (as both academics and practitioners) the PublicsLab gave them time and the resources to be accountable to the communities they serve. Their most recent collaboration was with Edge Effect Media Group, a “think-and-do tank” that I co-founded with Nic. Our work brings polydisciplinary scholars, artists and activists together to create community, scholarship, and performances, using the principles of Participatory Action Research at its foundation.

It's super nice to be with both you, Nic and Mica, today. I'm glad to have you here and to speak about your experiences with PublicsLab. To kick us off, and in keeping with the series of our conversations here, will you both share what led you to the Graduate Center and then also to PublicsLab? Mica, do you wanna kick us off?

**MBT:** Sure. Actually my first contact with the Graduate Center was a group relations and theory class with [Tamara Buckley](#), who I still collaborate with and work with both in my consulting work for organizations and we do research together. Tamara's work is about race and organizations. That class was focused on group relations and race and organizations and other aspects of identity. And that actually was, in 2013, my first contact with the Graduate Center.

After that I got my LMSW, my degree in Social Work. I wasn't quite ready to do a PhD. I was looking for a more practice-oriented degree. I was working with a lot of

young people in schools and excited about clinical work. And in that program I got really interested in research and policy and sort of thinking about multi-dimensional research. So, *how do we think about the individual*, right? Like the clinical work... while I think the more radical, justice-oriented, thoughtful clinical work does take into account structure, social environment, all of those things... I was really interested in, *how do I take that work further? How do I think across these levels, right? Individual, social, family, institutional, structural, systemic*. That brought me to meet with [Michelle Fine](#) at the Graduate Center about the [Critical Psychology program](#). She actually linked me up with an organization who was looking to do some Participatory Action Research about a group of alternative schools in New York City. And in doing that I decided I wanted to apply for the PhD program and dig deeper into participatory methods, critical psychology methods, social science inquiry. And that seemed like the best program for me.

Once I got in, PublicsLab was on the one hand an opportunity to get some funding, some long-term funding for my work, that would really fill in for... I wasn't getting any funding really from the Graduate Center after the first year. And then it was really exciting to think about joining a community of scholars who were thinking across disciplines about how to do public facing scholarship. It was a sort of wonderful marrying of the logistical/practical concerns and the more professional/embodied concerns about my work.

**JA:** Nic, do you want to fill us in on your journey and your coming to grad school and PublicsLab?

**NB:** Yeah, absolutely. It's funny, I think I have a very similar story to tell in a different universe. I first heard about the Graduate Center in 2013 also. It was through its public facing, theater branch called the [Martin E. Segal Center](#), which still exists now. And they give this annual award that the students at the CUNY Grad Center give called the [Edwin Booth Award](#) for someone in New York City who makes a profound impact on the theater of the city. They were giving an award to [Elevator Repair Service](#). And I knew someone who was helping organize that award who invited my theater company, [The Assembly](#), to perform tributary pieces of art that was woven into the ceremony itself. I was co-artistic director of that theater company, and a practicing set designer and director, and it wasn't until a couple years later when I was teaching full-time at Kean University in New Jersey that I resolved to get a PhD. I had an MFA, and an MA in Political Philosophy, and academia was always woven into my practice. I saw this as a wonderful opportunity once I learned that PhD students could get paid, So it was a really great foundation for the radical art making that I was doing and continue to do. Also I'm super committed to the work of academia and felt that I had an opportunity to deepen my practice there.

When I heard about the PublicsLab about a year and a half into my studies, it was just announced that it was going to open. Mica and I were part of the inaugural class of fellows. At the same time, there was also a class being offered by [Professor Bianca Williams](#) called "Re-Imagining the Humanities for the Good of the Public," and I signed up for that course too. And it was such a warm fit. It was, like Mica, a place that I felt thrilled to be encountering people who are committed to the public good in various different ways, who are specific, and interested in defining what that means, and who are committed to one another's growth. And that's what I loved about being

in the theater community all these years, and it's really one of the things that helps me thrive. I was delighted that, contrary to much experience and popular belief, that such things could exist in higher education at the PhD level.

**JA:** Theater by its nature has to be participatory. We don't make it siloed and it is inclusive of an audience. And Mica you were talking about participatory research, and I think that's one of the things that becomes really important in the scholarship that both of you are doing. I'm wondering within your own programs, were there opportunities before getting to the PublicsLab that allowed you to form projects and have communities where the research was part of that scholarship? Or was PublicsLab a new space that kind of allowed for a new form of scholarship to occur for you?

**MBT:** My program is a hub for participatory research in many forms. And there are lots of people who come through my program and have really thought deeply about the many aspects of participatory research around ethics, methods, impact, collaboration, what different kinds of collectives look like, accountability. And a lot of that is also supported by the [Public Science Project](#), which is affiliated with my program.

Coming in as a new scholar, early on I was working on [Beyond Acceptance Research Collective](#) and the [Youth Justice Research Collaborative](#), which are both projects with young people. But what PublicsLab gave me was a space to articulate what that work meant to me, to my field, in the world, and where I thought we could work and make our processes stronger. And so PublicsLab was not so much an incubator of that work for me, as it was a place to play with ideas and think with other people who were really seriously wanting to understand that.

**NB:** You know, I, I'm inspired by remembering that from the very beginning of my participation in the PublicsLab there's been a lot of emphasis on accountability. And for me, in large part, that's been my devised theater community in New York City, which has placed a large premium and a lot of energy into living and imagining better ways of being together. And as I walk into the academy again as a student, I've wanted to carry that responsibility, where often it can feel bifurcated or separated out. So that's one way in which it's remained present.

And the other way is that, despite being in this program, I have been continuing to make creative work throughout, and that has changed and evolved with the time as the needs of my various working lives have changed and evolved. I think that our field is not quite as advanced.

The Theater and Performance field where I and Jess ground ourselves, and where our doctorates are located, is much newer to the notion of participatory research and validating it. And not to say that it hasn't always been present in theater history, but there's this new term called Practice as Research, which has found much more footing in the UK, Australia, Canada, other places in Europe perhaps, and around the world, but is slower to come to the US. And so I've definitely felt aligned with that.

Part of the tenets that really speak to me is the notion that there's knowledge that can only be gained through the doing. That the experience, the embodied experience and the community experience of knowledge-production, and even art-making, transforms your perspective on what it is. More than anything, I think, the PublicsLab has helped

me validate that in my field, that there are other people who consider this real work, real research, that informs my dissertation work, that informs my very being on the planet, and also the political and scholarly goals that I have for my work.

The PublicsLab gave me cover to consider the work that I'd already been doing elsewhere, and planning to be doing creatively, *as scholarship*. I used my time in the PublicsLab, my "internship" space to focus on the creative work that was deeply ingrained with my scholarship. I would've been doing it anyway, but it allowed me to focus on it with greater intentionality.

**MBT:** I think this will be familiar to a lot of scholars who work in a project-based way. Whatever grant you've gotten, whatever funding you've gotten, almost never lasts long enough for the work to be finished. And so PublicsLab in a way offered me the kind of space to say, *okay, this grant is over, but we're not done. I can't necessarily sustain this work myself, but knowing that I have that consistent funding would allow me to keep working on something.*

You know, an example of that is the Beyond Acceptance Research collective, where we, where I, worked with a group of young queer people who, with me and some artistic folks, were studying this paradigm of acceptance around family, right? *What is beyond acceptance? If acceptance is the floor, how do we think beyond it? We're uncovering things like, what does it mean for families to have solidarity? What does it mean for family members to do their own work around gender and sexuality? What does it mean to make commitments to dismantling heteronormativity and cis-normativity and have that work its way into your family dynamics? What does it mean to celebrate queerness and to understand it as unique and complex? And not categorize it, or too quickly label and put people into boxes around what their identities might be.*

And we used these artistic methods. We made zines. We did tons of interviews and, wrote comic books and things like that. The end of that work happened when Covid hit, and so to sustain that, that we were able to keep going past the actual grant period, was really in part due to PublicsLab.

**NB:** I just wanted to jump in real quick and add one thought, which is, it's so cool listening to you talk, Mica. Always. I'm always so inspired by these conversations. I think the academic world I grew up in was one that professors were saying, *Stop doing outside work. Focus. You need to really prioritize your scholarship, your classwork.* And I think one thing that unites the people in the PublicsLab... and which has been really supported by Stacy and Bianca and Kandice, the leaders of our project... is that by trusting in people to do work, and giving them resources and support, that they are going to be doing the work that's relevant, that is deeply embedded and involved with their classwork, in their dissertation writing and other things like that. There has never been a moment, frankly, that I felt that someone's taken advantage of this, been lazy, ultimately slacked off in any real way. I think it's allowed much more fullness to come to the table, and that's something that's really, truly benefited my scholarship.

**MBT:** You know, the pressure is real. This has not been an easy path to take right? In the academy. And I think of you often, actually, in my moments of *this is hard to prioritize all of this work that's cross-institutional, that's in-community, that's slow, that's deliberate about process and not just outcome.* Right? Because that takes time.

And you don't necessarily know what the outcome is gonna look like, and it's not necessarily, or most usefully gonna fit an academic frame, right? Some of our most useful outcomes from our work are about where it really gets picked up by whatever community you're most accountable to and interested in being accountable to. For a number of my projects that's been young people across different experiences, and it's been more important to me that the work is relatable to them, gets picked up by them, that they're interested, than it has been that it's picked up by academic spaces. Of course, you wanna think about balance there as you do in all parts of your life, but I do think what you're saying is really true.

I would add a layer to that, which is that I think people who are taking this pathway, who don't have places like the PublicsLab to support them, often get moved out of the academy, because it doesn't really work. Though it should. Though there should be so much more space for this kind of scholarship. There often isn't, and so you get squeezed out. And so I really appreciate you making that point, and I think that's something really to sit with.

**NB:** Yeah. Just give those people more money. That's the answer. Don't kick 'em out.

**MBT:** Totally. *[Laughs.]*

**JA:** I think that's a great segue to talk about Edge Effect, because Edge Effect is its own project that bridges the academy and also various different communities and is something that could potentially reside both within or beyond the academic world. Before I get too into that, Nic, Edge Effect was a kernel of your idea and it's a large part of what brought me to the Grad Center and then also into the PublicsLab. Could you just give us a little bit of the origin story of Edge Effect and the idea, and how you developed it and brought it into PublicsLab?

**NB:** Yes. We have a long history, don't we, you and I, Jess? One of the things that we did eight years ago was create this weird storefront installation inspired by trying to unpack the techniques of Public Relations that fly under our conscious radars in everyday life. Over time, for me, the desire to grow that branch of research, performance research, which is to say a Critical PR body of work, has really become more and more important. And I was finding myself unable to do that in the structure of my life before, which was running The Assembly.

So I was in the PublicsLab. It was in the middle of my first year there, and I decided, *You know what? It's time. I just need to take a leap of faith.* Because it had already become clear by this point that this is the topic of my dissertation as well. The first thing I did was call Jess, who was such a crucial collaborator in that first project, and found that we were aligned in where we were and where we wanted to go, and that there was so much promise in figuring it out together.

And so for me, the original impulse of Edge Effect was to bring together people across disciplines using the techniques of devised theater to try to create new work, dismantling and studying and articulating the techniques of PR. But what I found, especially collaborating with both of you, was that there was a more important, broader mission statement that we discovered together, which was that by bringing people together from across different disciplines into deep community, into

conversation, into process-driven work, we could tackle all sorts of topics and ideas that require coalitional thinking, that are bigger than any one field to address.

**JA:** One of the things that calls forward to me is that it was not just disciplines, but it was... I think that beyond academia, people might not think of disciplines. But it's so important that there... there are so many forms of knowledge that are out there. And that we all perform knowledge in many different ways.

And so Edge Effect, which has become this kind of "think-and-do tank," purposely looks for what the academic world might call non-traditional forms of knowledge-making... citizens, activists, organizers, journalists, coders, you name it... to come in and use both their personal background as well as their tools that they find the most useful or the most interesting or something that they want to develop more within the work of the projects that we are doing. Our current project is *Mourning Machine*, and so much of that was and is in response to Covid, and us seeing this need for us to be able to have the space to connect our scholarship with a layer of reality, of mourning, of existing with loss in new ways that, that were like so unexpected.

One of the pieces that I'd like to share with our listeners is how we were able to make that work. How thinking about bringing a public in happened, who we were looking to work with, and where we were trying to find collaborators.

**MBT:** Really how this happened for me is that I came to a gathering that you all had, that I think was focused on visioning the possibilities for Edge Effect and thinking through what it does look like as a collective. I had done a lot of participatory work already. I had been in all kinds of different collective participatory research processes before then, and not to say at all that I know anything. *[Laughs.]* But when I came to your gathering, I had really never been in that kind of participatory research space.

I found myself from meeting to meeting with this sort of feeling that, especially when you're on a new journey... I think it's like mourning in a sense. It's like this real destabilization of normative space and time, right? Where all of a sudden you're knocked off a plane of existence and introduced to another way of being, of relating, of thinking, such that I would sometimes come to our meetings befuddled, like you had given us a kind of assignment. And I didn't really know where we were going. And there's a couple things there that were super useful to me. One was just that it was hard. That is hard. Just like when that happens to us in mourning and grieving, it is extremely difficult to be rocked in your body and your spirit, in your soul. But if you can approach it at least to an extent, with some groundedness, without shame, through love, which I think you two created: that holding environment in the group to allow for that.

And so I was able to show up through that lens and it really inspired in me a couple things. One, I was like, "this actually must be often what it's like to join a collective that *I'm* leading, and I have a sense of the trajectory, but other people in the room don't necessarily. And so that was the useful experience. And then secondly, I just thought to myself, I want to learn more about this process. I love that also thinking as a clinician. That's so much how I think in general, and so it was really beautiful to be in that space and have so much interdisciplinarity, especially on the artistic side.

And then, through that, I had been having these conversations with people in my life about grief and mourning. Obviously we were dealing with tremendous grief and mourning in our culture across many different areas. This was in the wake of George Floyd's murder. This was in the wake of Covid. This was in the wake of thinking through environmental destruction and negligence, and then thinking through my own grief. This past November was 10 years since I lost my mom.

Through all of that, I actually came across this [article by Malkia Devich-Cyril](#) about grief and mourning in social movements. And that was sent to me by a dear friend of mine who I've known for years. After receiving that article, I really felt like, okay, let's see where we could go with this. Nic, I came to you and we had coffee and we had this gorgeous conversation that seemed to really resonate. You were thinking about all different kinds of rituals, and how do we deal in the public with grief and mourning? And also on the other side of that, how does our culture capitalize on people's grief and mourning? And we were playing with those ideas together, and when I say playing, I mean, you know, taking seriously, but also lightly. And then I think you, and then going back to Jess, saw Edge Effect as a potential home for that project, and a sort of vehicle through which we could move the work, and that was really exciting to me.

**NB:** It's so right. One of the things that Jess and I knew from the beginning was that we wanted to build this space in community. The two of us have such limited knowledge, just as two human beings, period, but also as two people who are both theater makers, right. And scholars. So you were part of that first group of 10 or so people that got together to imagine what Edge Effect could be, and then a year later that's really when we were having this conversation about what could Edge Effect's first project be? And we wanted to work with someone who wasn't part of our sort of "default" field in creating that. Because again, we wanted for it to be so much bigger than us.

And that's one of the things that has been so successful about the work this way. I just know for myself that I love being in communities where I'm able to bring my whole self, and I learn so much that way, and I feel so seen, and it's healing. The pace at which we try to work, and the commitments to love and also to *play*. Such an important word. It keeps getting reiterated every time we do a workshop of any kind in Edge Effect. Play keeps being celebrated as this notion of teaching and learning at the same time, in non-hierarchical ways. That was really such a gift to discover, that certainly I didn't bring to the table.

To discover that your work in Participatory Action Research aligns so complimentarily with the devised theater work, process oriented work, that that Jess and I both come from was also such a delight, because you're such an expert facilitator. You have different techniques. We've been able to find really interesting hybrids and flows as we move, not just among the three of us, of course, but among everybody who brings their whole selves to the projects that we do.

**JA:** I love hearing the two of you. Like I, part of me was like, oh, I wanna become part of the conversation. But I just love hearing the two of you talk with each other, and I learn so much from it. So it's been wonderful to listen and to think about Edge Effect. And a way that I think of rounding this conversation out would be what is your dream and your vision for where Edge Effect will and can go? And/or/also what is your

dream and your vision for what this *Mourning Machine* will become? And I'll have us end with that.

**NB:** I just wanna start by saying, Jess, that I've taken seriously your role as facilitator here, but *[laughs]* I want someone to interview you so badly, right? You have entire dimensions of thought that Mica and I don't access that is always so much at the driving heart of everything that Edge Effect does. The care for process, but also for system-thinking and interpersonal care, is very present in the fabric of this conversation, but I think needs to be made explicit.

I know there are a thousand ways to answer the question of where *Mourning Machine* could go. I'm curious what little fragments and pieces we can drum up here, Mica, if anything's calling out to you right now.

**MBT:** I'll just say two things, which is that the process itself that we're facilitating, but also that everybody in the collective is helping to facilitate, I think is really beautiful and in its own right deserves to be an "outcome", you know? I think that there is a kind of zone specific to the content around grieving and mourning that we may be able to crack open, or play with, or sit with that it may offer dimensions that other work around this is not offering. And I think I'm hoping it offers collective and embodied dimensions that build on other people's work, for sure, but that also offer another space. And I think some of the "machines" that we're developing could potentially offer that.

One other thing is that, a lot of what is really important to me and interesting in my work is demystifying and un-gatekeeping the process of research, and we saw this. Once we brought our collective together, we immediately saw how people are scholars of their everyday lives. People are constantly doing research in their everyday lives. That's really exciting to me, thinking through some of that everydayness.

**NB:** Yeah. I'll share some stuff, and then, Jess, I actually want to hear what kind of bow you want to put on this.

What you say resonates so much, Mica. You know, one of the unusual things about Edge Effect is the celebration of *group study* as a goal in and of itself. And what I love so much about your honing in on the topic of grief and mourning as a unifying subject for us to approach from all of our personal and disciplinary angles--a place for us to, to play and to teach, and to learn--is that we all have access to it. But the problem, especially that we've been identifying in our culture, is the lack of talking about it with each other. That there's something about living in this country at this moment in time where it is hard. It is not rewarded. In fact, it's disincentivized in a lot of interesting ways. And so by learning from each other, we're learning so much as individuals, but also we're able to create a body of knowledge and work that might be helpful in terms of shortcuts for other people, that could give people that embodied sense of knowing themselves, but also a scholarly sense of knowing too.

I mean, we're interested in that multi-dimensional output, not only because each one of those things is valuable on their own, and not only because unique things happen when they're brought together, but also because of a theory about impact and change.



That by doing multiple things like this at once, an idea that is stolen a bit from the PR world, you can crack through and get a lot more coverage, attention, and we can make a bigger impact with the work we do by engaging on multiple fronts at the same time and appealing to multiple audiences at the same time. That's the other wonderful gift of our collaboration is the unique audiences of our collaborators, each of whom are incredible leaders of their own right, and each one of whom is individually a polydisciplinary person of themselves. And I love that word that you brought to us, MBT: polydisciplinary. Yeah, my hope is more of the, of the same, which is to say nourishment, and learning, and preparing for harder things--but more than anything learning how to share that with more people.

**JA:** So, uh, my button or my ribbon or thoughts to Edge Effect and also to *Mourning Machine*...

I think I'm probably one of the most non-traditional PhD students that exists. I am here for the research. And I'm here for the deep learning that can only happen within community. I'm not necessarily here for returning or staying within an academic world. And I think sometimes the shape of the projects that come from a PhD often have to begin with some kind of a question, and then you have to have some kind of an answer to it. So it has to have a final product to it. I'm not interested in product. I'm interested in process, and I think what Edge Effect does and what I'm hoping for it to do... In my wildest dream, I see us akin to [Black Mountain College](#) where we create and we have a space that has a safe and caring environment that allows for the most dynamic, diverse group of humans to come together around a subject or a question or a provocation or curiosity. And that there will be this continual loop. And that there will be moments of art. There will be moments of scholarship, there will be moments of, of just open play for a public. And that can be exactly what it is. And I think that trying to find a place for that in society is the thing that I'm most interested in. So hopefully Edge Effect becomes, a diasporic, roving entity that just continues to bring brilliant souls like yours, and our groups, and our collectives, together. Thank you so, so, so much for having this conversation and for your time today.

**NB:** Yeah. Love being part of this space, always, with both of you. No end to how much we can talk about, but again, glad we can share it out a little bit and invite folks to contact us if ever we could be helpful.

**MBT:** Yeah, and I love what you just said. It's so exciting to, to keep dreaming about that with you.

**JA:** Thank you guys.

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.

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