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Public is a Verb -- Policy, Public Scholarship, and Pushing the Horizon: A Conversation with PublicsLab Mentor Professor, Michelle Fine

Interviewer: Jess Applebaum (JA)

Interviewee: Michelle Fine (MF)

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List of Acronyms: GC=Graduate Center; Bianca=Bianca Williams;

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 program, advised them as they negotiated their home programs. And many also advocated for reform and renewal within their programs and across the university, while championing public scholarship projects of their own.

Coming up we will hear from [Professor Michelle Fine](#), mentor of PublicsLab fellow [Britney Moreira](#). Michelle is a distinguished professor in Critical Psychology, Women's Studies, Social Welfare, American Studies, and Urban Education at CUNY, and is on the faculty of the University of South Africa. Michelle talks to me about the relationship between participatory action research and public scholarship, as well as the critical role public scholars play in supporting the implementation of just social policies.

Hi Michelle. Thank you so much for joining us today. I was wondering if you could share what your relationship is to public scholarship. How do you understand public scholarship and how do you situate your work within its understanding?

MF: For me the word public is a verb. That is, it's a way of doing scholarly work alongside, in, for, about, and with larger publics. I think of public as a rendering of membranes porous between the academy and the communities to which we should be obligated to tell another story.

I'm trained as a social psychologist. I've long been involved with gendered struggles around prison abolition, domestic violence, intimate violence, state violence. I've done work with undocumented communities and queer youth and Muslim American young people. I taught at the University of Pennsylvania for a long time in the [School of Education](#). Then I wanted to get a real job, so I got a job at the Graduate Center. In Psych, we carved out the only [Critical Psychology](#) program in the country, which is a

very interdisciplinary space for students, faculty, and activist colleagues. So most of our work, Jessica, is oriented toward a combination of theory building, policy making, and public education in a big sense, like popular education.

[The Public Science Project](#) is best known for what we call [Critical Participatory Action Research](#), which is too many syllables to say that research should be a praxis engaged by and with communities under siege: Movements for justice. And the Academy can be a resource. We can also be a hegemonic creepy presence, but we can be a resource in a praxis of building knowledge, excavating knowledge, challenging dominant lies, reimagining policy, making visible struggles on the ground, without making vulnerable, people who are most impacted. And really, what some would call epistemic justice: A recognition that knowledge is produced everywhere.

People most marginalized probably have the best line of analysis on the history and shape and consequences of injustice. But that's not to evacuate that those of us in the academy who might humbly have something to offer, if we can build collective research spaces alongside each other to pool our knowledges, explore our ignorances, and craft a question worth asking.

JA: I'm quite taken by this. One of my fields of research is Practice as Research, which is quite close to Participatory Action Research. And it struck me, within all of my years of education and of becoming a scholar, that no one had ever really sat me down to think of the efficacy of how we research, who we research with, and what we research about.

Your program begins at that phase before it gets to a final product that goes out into the world and is known as academic scholarship. I'm wondering if you see a difference in the output or in the quality or in the type of final presentation of scholarship that happens because you begin with a public that's vital to your research and scholarship.

MF: That's cool. Yeah. You know, our students are extraordinary. And in the landscape of psychology, they apply to us because they dare to read widely, dream big, generate theory, methods, ethics, ask dangerous questions with some very traditional and very innovative creative methods. So, yes, I think the ultimate works are always pushing the horizon. And yet, if you're at the Graduate Center, you know there's a simultaneous commitment to learning the canon, learning the history. So it's a double, it's like they get two degrees at once.

The other night we had a, a book talk by [Rosemary Roberts](#) who graduated from our program. She's a dance scholar at Connecticut College. And she graduated in 2005. She has a new book, which I should plug. It's called [Bearing Unbearable Sensualities](#). It's on hip-hop, race and power. Even then, though, her dissertation was tracking the dance troupe [Ronald K. Brown Evidence](#). Not the impact of the dance on audiences as everyone wanted her to do, but the experience of performing Black dance for, usually, but not only, White audiences.

She had us in 2005 watching videos and tracking our breath as an analytic method for like, *when did we stop breathing? When were we compelled to tears?* And she's really evolved an analytic strategy that takes our affect seriously in the analysis. And it was so beautiful because the people who showed up for the talk... Many of our students

feel these days like analysis is colonizing. I don't wanna leave my fingerprints on other people's narratives. And, and I felt like she was saying analysis is a form of love and engagement. *I'm not the final answer, but I'm engaging with what these dancers have told me and have performed.* And that's the analytic strategy.

[Kate Sheesh](#), in a very different setting, just completed her dissertation. She went off to Greece and then Germany when migrants were arriving. And she ended up, just because she's a goddess, kind of running a refugee camp because all these volunteers showed up and nobody was in charge. There was no state. And she wrote a [dissertation on the volunteer narratives](#). And these volunteers are gorgeous and a little bit White-savior. And she wrote this beautiful, hard dissertation on how does one write that which is impossible to contain. And then she had an epilogue on the refusal to bring closure to the text, which was very discomforting for readers and Chairs. Like, *What'd you learn? And what are your limitations?* And she refused to tie it up.

[Donald Brown](#) who just graduated and is at York just did a [dissertation](#). He did ethnographies of social psych labs. He's an African American man who just can't believe how in social psych labs, we make up race by calling someone Malcolm or Lamar assuming that travels. And so he tracked the intellectual shrinkage that happens in the name of professional socialization and then how our work moves into the *New York Times* and public venues.

None of this, Jessica, was predicted when we first admitted these students into the program. They were gorgeous. They saw the world at an angle, like there's a character and a [Barbara Kingsolver](#) novel who sees the world at a 38 degree angle. They're accepted for the line of analysis, but then they metabolize in soil that says, *learn it, do it, critique it. Imagine what else is possible.* And they end up with a strong sense of accountability to theory to the academy, but much more so to the communities they are working with and alongside.

[Music]

JA: Within our PublicsLab, one of the things that we as fellows got to do was find mentors to work with, and to guide us within the two years of our fellowship. And so I was wondering if you could speak to what it meant to be a mentor.

MF: I think that PublicsLab invited us to wander into, more deeply, the really intimate ethics of teaching, mentoring, and then when we're engaging public scholarship, you know, the affects of doing that work. COVID certainly made more salient and concrete that we're stepping into community settings.

Bianca [Williams]'s commitment to a kind of radical honesty, the collective interrogation of the affects of scholarship, rather than partitioning those or having a little reflexivity statement that says *I'm a white cis-woman who lives in New Jersey, but none of those categories should tell you who I am.* It was an interrogation of who we are in complex, intersectional ways, who we are in our intimate mentoring, teaching relations, who we are as a community at the Graduate Center.

So thinking through the, you know, the delicate tensions, not contradictions, but tensions of what's it mean to be in the academy, of the academy, not of the academy

when we all know it's corporate and White supremacist and patriarchal and colonial and gorgeous and fun and a space of jazz and liveliness.

PublicsLab enabled both of those things to be said at once. Like a jazz, not a contradiction. And so it was kind of gorgeous to meet students from all over and people they would choose as mentors.

JA: As someone who's been involved with public work for such a long time, what impact do you think PublicsLab has had throughout the Graduate Center? And as we are thinking of ways in which it can exist in the future, in new forms--

MF: Yeah.

JA: Where do you see that possibility happening?

MF: Many of us love the Graduate Center, could be elsewhere, choose to be there, students and faculty, because it, it beats with a public heart. And PublicsLab became a, a space to articulate that heart: Heart as an intellectual project, heart as an ethical project, heart as an historic project, and heart as a relational project.

PublicsLab has made evident a strong impulse within the Graduate Center to move between humanities, social science, performance, to think through accountabilities and audience. Like that's been animated. And so there's no going back. And that's fabulous.

Should there be some dedicated dissertation fellowships on public scholarship? Should there be a big fundraising campaign, which I've long argued, with [City Council](#) and philanthropy to say: We are serving alongside a city engaged in delicious and hard struggles, support students to do this work.

Years ago I got a big grant from the [Soros Foundation](#) to fund, I think we called them Public Policy fellows, people who are doing public scholarship. And there's no reason the Graduate Center shouldn't be able to do that. To really animate it. Because unlike most universities, we have the capacity to articulate why and how this is scholarship and knowledge production and public work.

The Graduate Center should be in solidarity with universities under siege. I just saw somebody got removed from some university in Florida for how he talks about race. A White guy who does Critical Race Theory. The Graduate Center should have that obligation for intellectual, ethical, academic refugees. We know the arguments. We know how to resist them. We know how to compel.

When I was at Penn, there was like a whole PR section that would take the work we were doing and get it on the cover of the Philadelphia Inquirer. And, the Graduate Center should be more animated in public spaces, private spaces. Maybe more work with the [School of Journalism](#) on that front.

So there are lots of vectors of possibility. I understand people seeing the university as just a colonial layover, but I'm not willing to cede it. Not the public university at all. I'm not willing to give it away or watch it crumble or dismantle.

JA: One of the things that I'm hearing is that the PublicsLab and your mentorship extended to actually be able to talk about the Graduate Center and about graduate culture and, and the academic world. Is that, is that right?

MF: That's absolutely right. And what does it mean to be doing this work? And is anybody listening?

In our program, we talk a lot about *to whom are we accountable? And who is our audience?* We're all starting with the question. I work a lot with organizers. One of the thing that distinguishes us is we start with the question. Not an answer. There's plenty of parts of my life where I start with an answer. Don't get me wrong, I have a lot of respect for that. But in our work, we start with a question and the inquiry generates more questions. Like, not everybody wants cops out of their neighborhood. They hate being harassed by them. They wanna be policed the way I am. Some of the formerly incarcerated women I work with say, *Michelle, some people need to go away, maybe not to a prison...* So the complexity that gets generated when you start with the complex dangerous question is gorgeous.

And our administration needs to be proud of the fact that we're in the forefront of dangerous conversations, whether it's Queer studies or we need to be more out there on disability justice. We have quiet conversations about Israel and Palestine, and there's a lot holding that down. And we need to be bold. We need to know these are conversations worth having.

JA: Thank you so much for your time and for this conversation.

MF: Thank you Jessica.

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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