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Making Visible Grad School's Hidden Curriculum: A Conversation with PublicsLab Fellow, Britney Moreira

Interviewer: Jess Applebaum (JA)

Interviewee: Britney Moreira (BM)

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List of Acronyms: GC=Graduate Center

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, Doctoral Student [Britney Moreira](#), from the Critical Social/Personality Psychology at the CUNY Graduate Center, discusses her academic journey and shares her experience as a PublicsLab fellow, as well as her vision for future iterations of PublicsLab at the Graduate Center and beyond.

Thanks so much for your participation in the PublicsLab archival project. I'd love to begin our conversation as I have with almost everybody and ask you to share a bit about your origin story, how you came to the Graduate Center, what program you're part, and what your focus of research is on.

BM: So, my name is Brittany Moreira. I'm a fourth year student in the [Critical Social/Personality Psychology](#) PhD program. And I'm a first-generation student.

Just a little backstory. I went to the University of Michigan for undergrad. I was a Bio Psychology major. I was a Creative Writing major. I was a Latin concentration. And, I had been on a pre-med track. I think most first-gen students... you know, all they know about grad school is becoming a doctor, like a medical doctor. I feel like I didn't know any other first-gen students who knew anything other than that. And possibly engineering.

I definitely didn't know what a PhD was until my senior year of undergrad, actually. At the time I was doing work with incarcerated young people. I was just volunteering. I was a part of a program called the [Prison Creative Arts Project](#). I was doing research with a professor who I'd confided in. And when I told her that I felt like I couldn't do this similar work in medical school, you know, she just sort of nodded her head, like

finally she's there. And she told me what a PhD was and explained the process to me. I went looking for schools that would allow me to do research with the same group of people, relatively, you know, basically incarcerated young people, or incarcerated people in general if that's the closest that I could get.

And I'd gone searching, but at the last minute, like weeks before applications were due, I told her that I loved the way that she'd been going about her research: She did interviews with people, but she brought the interviews back to the people that she interviewed and basically asked their opinion. *Does this sound right? This is what we're seeing. Can you explain? Can you tell us what's really happening?* She also did video recordings of how parents played with their children. Ultimately she asked the parents, *What was actually going on here? What was your intention?* Things like that. And I told her, "I love that, you know, you're not just studying people, you're including them in this study." And once I mentioned that, she was like, Michelle Fine. She sent me this link to [Michelle](#), which was on the page of the Graduate Center. I applied to the Critical Social Personality/Psychology program and I ended up here.

Immediately, my first year I started working on a project about the [Raise the Age Law](#), which is basically a law that says that 16 and 17 year-olds can no longer be tried as adults in a court of law automatically. Of course, there are always loopholes whenever the targeted population is Black and Brown people. There will be a thousand loopholes to the law. But that is the project that I came in on, working with [Brett Stoudt](#).

And so, it was just like I immediately was able to work with the group of people that I'd wanted to work with. Building solidarity there. But I had very little funding. I applied for the [Ford fellowship](#) my first year, which I got, so I'm a Ford fellow now. But I also applied for the PublicsLab fellowship, which I'm grateful to have gotten. And my intention was that, hopefully I'd be able to think and build and create with other... You know, I often think of Psychology as the humanities, and I know it's a stretch sometimes, but creative writing was where my stress was. That's where my focus was. That's where my heart was. I always think of ways to connect Psychology back to the humanities. And I want it to be surrounded by folks in other humanities concentrations.

I was really hoping that I'd get into PublicsLab so we could talk about what public facing work means, as thinkers, not just scientists, but even as artists, you know, for those of us who are artists. I wanted to brainstorm about this a little bit deeper with folks who are positioned to do that work more often: To have to dig a little bit deeper about what it will actually look like, to think through the process of bringing your work to the public in a way that really involves the public and isn't just like, *here you go, this is what we did*. And I got in!

I still work with incarcerated young people working on the same project around the Raise the Age Law and just juvenile justice in general. But I also do work involving policing. And I'm hoping, and what I talked about in my time at PublicsLab as well, was that hopefully I'll be able to do work that reintroduces creative arts into my work with incarcerated young people. My big dream is to one day build a creative arts alternative to incarceration for young people, present in all states so that there can always be an arts alternative to incarceration. Cause no kid should be incarcerated, period.

So that's me. I hope I answered your questions for that one.

JA: Wonderfully. Thank you so much for that. And it leads me to want to know, what the conversations with us fellows were. Were there similar questions that you were finding among our peer groups? And what were the kind of brainstormings or what was the kind of support that you received from fellows within our cohort? What was fresh, or supportive or interesting, that you saw as either threads or trends or, you know, what, what was happening within, inside of our conversations that you find, that might be useful for listeners to have insight into?

BM: Yeah, I have to be honest, I think the most helpful thing that I got from PublicsLab was... I don't know if this was the intention, but I think the most helpful thing that I got was other students talking very openly about what it's like to be an academic. I think the conversations that we had helped me ground myself better when I think about what it means to do public facing work.

Lots of the questions that we got in PublicsLab was just about... I feel like they were about authenticity. I think they were about how to remain human while doing whatever work you do in academia.

We had such a beautiful mix of people, you know? People in Anthropology, I think we had people in Criminal Justice, we had me in Psych, we had English Majors... We had such a good mix of people and I think the fact that we were all struggling with what it means to be an academic and try to make sure we're maintaining a way to see humanity in our work before even talking about *how do I bring this to the public? How do I involve the public? What does public facing look like within my work?*

I think working through being who you wanna be while doing the work that you do was a focus for us. Even with things that seem mundane. Like, you know, *how do I read academic articles? You know, I don't understand what's going on. Everyone seems to understand, this is draining. I hate this language. It feels like it's written for people who are not me. I feel like this stuff is written to keep me out.*

I mean, I'm in my fourth year and still the most helpful thing that I've heard from anyone in all of my four years was [Bianca Williams](#) talking about the Hidden Curriculum. There are things that you know. The fact that you feel like there are things everyone knows, and you don't know, that is part of this Hidden Curriculum. I felt seen for the first time. And that was in PublicsLab. And I felt like it wasn't just me. And I think with that I was able to start building my confidence again because it was whittled down pretty quickly.

I think once she [Bianca] started talking about the Hidden Curriculum and different ways to view imposter syndrome, I was able to get my grounding together again and say, *You know what? The only reason you got knocked down during this academic process was because it was this whole entire system is built to knock you down.*

Once I know my environment, then I can start asking braver questions, more critical questions, and it made me feel like I was capable of doing the work that I set out to do. And then, by the time we got to the end of our second year in our fellowship, I felt comfortable to do what we started to do, which was thinking about what it would look

like to have a class that was about public facing work, what it means to do public scholarship, what it means to be a public scholar period.

JA: Are there other elements of the hidden curriculum that, that you would be able to expose for listeners that were part of our conversations.

BM: I think what also came up for me was ... Part of that Hidden Curriculum I think was learning when to speak up with your advisors. Things are not just on autopilot. Like, you're in a lot more control than you think you are. But also learning what it means to navigate those relationships where the power lies or can lie, learning when and how to speak up. And take up the space that I need. I'm not the most timid person in the world, but there were things that I was afraid to say, questions that I was afraid to ask because I, I just felt like your advisor, they're supposed to lead you and take you this way and that way. I learned that part of this process is they're working to help you. You know, I don't wanna say they work for you, but like, *you go where I wanna go and you help me like clear my way*. I think learning that I had that type of power was a part of it.

Some people don't realize until they're very far along in their doctoral experience that they have that type of power. *What am I obligated to do? What do I have to do? Help me understand what I have to do so that I can be free about everything else that's just super up to me...*

JA: I wanted to also talk about developing skills that would enable us to thrive in the academic world and also in non-academic spaces. We received some of those skills through our internships, but there was also a lot of programming that was happening that Director Stacy Hartman and our Faculty Lead, Bianca Williams had curated. So I was wondering if you'd be able to share with our listeners, some of what that programming was and what you found valuable, like in those invited guest speakers or in the tutorials that we received.

BM: Yeah, that's a really good question... I think when I think back to the people who came in and skills that I was building, I think what really resonated with me in terms of skills that I could use in academia and outside of academia... This one's probably a bit more academic, but someone came in to teach us about oral histories, and I really loved that. *Of course I could speak to people in my neighborhood. Of course, I could go back generations and ask people their experiences, their thoughts, opinions, beliefs*. That was really cool.

It also taught me to like, think on my toes and what it means to engage in thoughtful but provoking conversation.

One of the most important things, in all four years of my time here... I loved the push to think of a career that you could have outside of academia. Think of what you might do if you weren't doing what you were doing. I am not my research. I am not just an academic. But also, if I do choose to do my research, if I do choose to go with academia, there are still other things that I can do as well. That led me to start thinking about consulting. Like, if I got like a professor position over in Michigan, for example, consulting would allow me to still work with communities and networks that I'd built out here on the East Coast.

JA: How would you like to see parts of the program incorporated into your program or the GC in a broader sense? What parts should be living on and can you think of how they might be able to live on.

BM: Absolutely. I think a lot about this. Towards the end of our time as fellows we were put together in these groups to think deeply about building a PublicsLab: A potential class setup, class outline, syllabus, like, you know, different things like that.

I feel like I was able to think more critically when I was around people who were not a part of the tradition of whatever my area focus was. And I think something that was cool about our cohort was that it was diverse in a way that I think we typically think about diversity, in terms of like, you know, race and ethnicity, but I think it was more diverse when it comes to discipline.

I would definitely wanna make sure that it [a PublicsLab course] is really interdisciplinary. Like if there are ten people in a class, I would love if there were at least six different research areas or six different programs in a room.

I think there's this thing that happens when people from the same program or department get together. I think they start talking in these circular ways about these assumptions that exist within their area of research. Like within psych or within whatever it is. But I think when you are with people of other disciplines there's nothing that's automatic. You know, there's nothing that's a given. You have to... Sometimes you find yourself, or I found myself, in a place where I had to justify certain things. And in the process of justifying why things are the way that they are in Social Psych, I found myself feeling more like, maybe it shouldn't be this way. Like maybe if this was fixed here, then I could be able to do something like this. Or maybe people wouldn't be, maybe psych wouldn't have the oppressive history that it has.

I think other than that... I would love... I think doing an internship would not work in a class, but I would do something like imagining your skills, your values, your focus, the things that are unmoving for you: Imagine them in another career or another area. Because I think what that does is reminds you of like... *what is unmoving about you as a scholar?* And those are the things, the ethics that you hold onto, you also keep in mind when it comes to approaching the public with your work.

You know, *what are your ethics? What are your values?* I think they get so slippery. People try to copy and paste the values from things like PAR [Participatory Action Research] and say, *yeah, those are my values. I agree with all of that.* But actually maybe you don't, and that's okay. Maybe your values, when it comes to approaching the public, are a bit more unique or they're specific to you. And I think thinking about what it will look like for you to be in another career, reminds you of what you're willing to compromise on and what you're absolutely not willing to compromise on as a person, as a scholar, as an artist, you know, all of these things.

I would love to see a world where Publics fellows, PublicsLab fellows, would be able to teach that class. And I don't even think it should just be one, like offer multiple sections of it. You know? I think it would be a great opportunity to get us out there, but also encourage more people to be thinking critically about what it means to do public facing work, what it means to be a public scholar, what it means to be a scholar activist, and what it means to maintain, the humanity and the work that you do.

JA: Yeah. And even in you're just saying PAR right now... so like you have Participatory Action Research and I have, Practice as Research or Performance as Research. And as we start to realize that we have forms of research that are just hit differently from different programs... all of a sudden something so vibrant starts to come up with like me thinking, *how am I responsible for the action of the art?* The action that you bring forward helps me generate, I think, better projects and better, methodologies.

BM: For sure. I love that so much. I'll never forget a conversation I had with Maddie who's in our cohort. I was just in a group with her one day. I was telling her about... I forget what it's called, but like this construction tool thing... I was drilling all these holes all over my apartment and just building random things. And I told her, *I have no idea why I'm doing this. Maybe I'm distracting myself from my work.* And she was just like, *No. I think it's just your creative writing trying to come out.* I think being speaking to people like Maddie... and you just reminded me that... We are all meant to communicate so uniquely, but certain disciplines that you can be in tend to insist that you communicate in certain ways. Yes I'm going to be a psychologist, but no one in the public that I wanna speak to, in the communities that I wanna care, that I care about, wants to hear psychology babble. But you know what people would wanna hear? Art communicated. And I have that way, I have that in me to be able to communicate in the forms that people would wanna listen to. Psychology communicated differently, in the form of art.

JA: Thank you so much for your time. I look forward to continuing to brainstorm and talk and you know, seeing how we will keep public scholarship and public facing work in our own ethics moving forward.

BM: For sure. Thank you for talking to me.

JA: Thanks.

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.