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Public Scholarship, Translating Scholarship for Diverse Audiences: A Conversation with PublicsLab Fellow, Queenie Sukhadia

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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, scholar and content creator [Queenie Sukhadia](#) shares insights into finding mentorship and encourages scholars to find or create the platforms that best serve their scholarship and audience.

Thank you so much for being here Queenie. However you'd like, will you let our listeners know what led you to the graduate center and then onto PublicsLab.

QS: Sure. There were multiple factors that led me to the Graduate Center. One was the [English PhD program](#) itself—I really liked what it had to offer. I also wanted to be in New York City because of all the opportunities that a place like New York City could provide me in terms of public institutions.

When I was applying to the Graduate Center, my research was really focused on 9/11 as a specific historical point and about testimonial narratives that emerged from it. I knew that there were so many kinds of archives around 9/11 in New York City, so that was another factor that drew me to the Graduate Center.

And then knowing the kind of resources that the Graduate Center had. I didn't necessarily know that I wanted a non-academic career per se, but I did know that I wanted to do some kind of public scholarship and just looking at the [PublicsLab website](#) showed me that this is a space that makes this possible. I found that really inspiring.

I wasn't involved with the PublicsLab in my first year, but I still looked at their events every now and again. And then when they sent out the call for the Mellon Public fellowship—this was towards the end of my first year—that's when I was like, okay,

this is something that I want to get involved with. I feel like that's when I really started getting immersed in what the PublicsLab had to offer.

JA: For those who are listening each Public fellow had a faculty member from their own program that was involved in guiding them through their fellowship experience. Can you tell us what attracted you to Kandice Chuh and what your relationship was like and how she supported your work as a Public fellow?

QS: Something that I found very fascinating about Kandice was that even despite being in the university, she's not "of" the university—she doesn't identify so closely with the university—and I mean that in the most positive way possible.

When I got involved with the PublicsLab and was starting out with the Mellon Fellowship, she was a very supportive mentor in terms of helping me name my passions and helping me deconstruct the binary we often hold onto between academia and non-academic spaces. She helped me cultivate a critical distance from the practices that disciplines or the university as an institution encourage. She was very supportive of me doing research that felt true to my commitments, public or otherwise.

She always said that if somebody tells you you can't do something, dig into the structures that tell you why you can't do it and push back against them, which I found powerful. And then secondly, she always said that the questions that you're asking through your research, the values that you hold close to you, always go with you. So you don't really ever abandon that identity of being a researcher or an academic, just because you occupy a different space from an academic one. These identities/commitments just take different shape. They take different forms. But they're still very much a part of who you are. And I found that really empowering.

JA: You talk, both yourself and also Kandice, of identifying so clearly that there's this unconscious binary that we often create between academic and non-academic worlds and I know that one of your missions is to dismantle that binary. I would love to hear from you what your strategies or what projects you undertook to generate a relationship between both worlds rather than the division between those worlds.

QS: I think one exercise that we did during my PublicsLab fellowship was really helpful for me to kind of work through this. Stacy and Bianca asked us to write a public positionality statement that talked about the publics we feel committed to and how we imagine those commitments taking shape. I encourage anyone looking to do more public-facing work to undertake this exercise.

The public no longer remains this amorphous thing out there that people inside the academy are trying to reach. We really end up trying to name these publics and why they form a public in these specific ways. Defining who you are reaching out to, or who you're trying to communicate with, or who you're trying to bring into the folds of something, I think helps build this relationship between the university and the outside public.

But it's also not just always an 'outside' public. So for example, if you're talking about, I don't know, *Game of Thrones* fandom, right? Aren't there *Game of Thrones*

fans—people who are part of this public—in the university?. So how does this binary still hold up?

Also, just thinking about the university as one workplace among others and not idealizing it as this place that is transformative for the world helps. There's so much important work happening outside the university too. Thinking about the university as one workplace among others that share both good things with these other industries, but also complicated histories with them, I think really helps take the university off the pedestal that we sometimes put it on.

JA: That's so worthwhile for all of us to think about more. That we all share, like similarities between our workplaces and that these are jobs that at the base of them, the same forms of labor exist.

One thing that you point out so well though, that is particular to the university system this “idea of academic thinking and academic writing.” And as public scholars we get to also think about the languages and the forms of communication that we want to further develop that also helps dismantle this divide between worlds. And I know that you have this amazing project, Academia for All. Can you share a little bit about what that project was and its ongoingness, how that how that developed, and where you see it going for the future?

QS: Yes, [Academia for All](#)...

I feel like when I read things that really speak to me or that inspire me, I always find a way to talk about them with people that are close to me. Now, most of my friends and family aren't academics. But a lot of these issues I was reading about, whether they fell within the realm of race studies or gender studies, they're things all of us are thinking about in different ways, right?

So these conversations, people—my friends and family—were still interested in them.

However, I could rarely point, them to certain texts and be like, read this, this is so great, because the language was keeping them out rather than inviting them in. Often, you need a very specialized vocabulary and familiarity with different theoretical schools of thought to understand what these texts are talking about. And so that always made me wish there was a way for people to read this important work happening in the university or in academic research spaces. I wished these barriers didn't exist and that prompted me to think about how I can make this research more accessible.

The work that I'm doing on Academia for All takes academic texts and tries to summarize them or break them down in ways that are accessible to people outside the academy or people who aren't involved with this kind of language in their day-to-day lives

Having said that, I think this project still, in some way, falls prey to those same things that I was talking about. Because again, when you know you're breaking something down, trying to provide the gist of an entire text, it is somewhat reductive. The translation work I do on this page loses so much of the nuance of the texts that make them so powerful. But it's still something, you know?

JA: We'll provide a link to that so that people can see your work there.

One of the things that you bring up, which I think is so important and it's a theme that continues to be talked about by many PublicsLab Fellows is how we translate our work between the university system and the internships that we are asked to fulfill.

I'm wondering what was the internship that you took on as a PublicsLab and how did that translation kind of feed into the work that you're doing now?

QS: I was working at this organization called [Constructive](#). They're a web design and brand strategy agency that works exclusively with nonprofits. So, they're often working with issues such as climate change or the gender pay gap or things like that and advising nonprofits on how to frame those issues or that research in a way that would be effective for public advocacy.

My role as an intern was multifaceted. I was working on their marketing materials. I was also working on their content strategy, sometimes on client projects. Where I could contribute, I was contributing, but I was also watching and taking it all in and seeing how the process works. During my last semester, I was actually looking at different kinds of public research organizations and thinking about how to frame issues or frame research in a way that would be effective for public advocacy.

One of the things that I really internalized during this internship was that we have to develop a sense of humility. We—the folks thinking about and researching these social justice issues—need to be humble and think about how we can take these things that we care about and insert them into people's everyday lives in ways that move them. When we do this, we start thinking about the language we use. We don't want language that is convoluted or long paragraphs that look too intimidating to engage with. We really start thinking about the ways in which people already read, the ways in which they consume information. We start asking: How can we make things accessible to motivate folks to engage with these issues? Thinking about how we write things, how we present things is what happens when we develop that sense of humility. I feel like it really opens up what's possible.

Nobody's obligated to engage with issues that I care about—even if I truly deeply feel like it's a collective issue that we all *should* care about—and I feel like that sense of humility really allows you to think through the question of how to make people engage and care.

JA: You used a really great phrase: design language. I think that's such a wonderful way of thinking about ways that we can further develop the scholarly work that we do so that it extends beyond a very limited scope of readers.

[Music]

Now, you've completed your PhD and you're currently working at LinkedIn. I would love to know what your current position is, how you found it, and how the PublicsLab supported your journey into this alt-academic career.

QS: So, I currently work as a [Content Designer at LinkedIn](#), and that means that I'm working with the UX team to design experiences, but through language and through

words. So the words that you see on LinkedIn, or different LinkedIn products, are often written by content designers. That is what I do.

The PublicsLab really helped me in multiple ways. First, they helped me identify the skills that I currently possess, the commitments that I want to uphold, and the values that I hold dear. Through career workshops, I really identified those values. I also identified skills gaps, things that I wanted to learn, what I found fascinating, and so on. That identification work helped me then go ahead and find ways to build the repertoire of skills I needed to help me land this job.

In a very practical way, I think Stacy was also really helpful in looking at my resumes and helping me fine tune those, which was really great.

Also, one of the big things that the PublicsLab provided was a community of people who are also thinking about the same things that I was, who didn't just find themselves limited to an academic or researcher identity and who were also doing all this kind of different public-oriented work. So being able to brainstorm with them, being able to find support for what I did with this community— be that faculty mentors or Mellon fellows— I think just having that community was great.

JA: Would there be any kind of last takeaway, like if there were to be a future version of this PublicsLab, what would you want that to be and how would you see that developing?

QS: I think a lot of what the PublicsLab already did for me was so great. It provided me with a space to be who I am. It provided me with models to look up to through all of these workshops that they hosted. They had people come and talk to us about all these different jobs that they did in all these different spaces, and it really expanded the range of what one thinks is possible with a PhD. I think that was so powerful.

I'm sure the PublicsLab could improve, but I already think that they provide such a robust support system and exploratory network for people that I feel like it's already a great space. The fellowships it has, the grants that it offers, already allows so much. So I think that's really powerful.

I think one last kind of piece of advice that I think Stacy and even Bianca and Kandice gave me, which I really want to hold up for people, is to think about your mentorship panel. Not just as the people who are directly working with you on your dissertation, but also people who support your ambitions in ways that extend beyond the dissertation. Find people who really support who you are in all these complex ways. Find mentors who either are doing things that you're interested in or who believe in you, and who want to encourage you to explore all these different parts of who you are. All these different commitments that you might have to different communities. I can't emphasize this enough: find your people.

JA: Wonderful. Thank you again for so much of your time.

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.