

\*This interview is part of the PublicsLab Archive: <https://publicslab.gc.cuny.edu/archive/>

## **Mentorship, Mutuality and the Ethics of Public Scholarship: A Conversation with Interim Faculty Lead, Professor Kandice Chuh**

Interviewer: Jess Applebaum (JA)  
Interviewee: Kandice Chuh (KC)  
Date and time: January 2023

List of Acronyms: GC=Graduate Center; DEO=Deputy Executive Officer; EO=Executive Officer; PI=Primary Investigator

**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.

Our archive features audio interviews with student fellows, faculty mentors, grant recipients, and the program's leadership. Dr. Stacy Hartman was the director of the program, Professor Bianca Williams served as its faculty lead, and Kandice Chuh interim faculty lead.

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.

In this interview, conducted in February of 2023, I speak with [Professor Kandice Chuh](#), PublicsLab's Interim Faculty Lead and member of CUNY's English program, about her relationship with fellow Queenie Sukhadia, the concept of mutuality and the ethics of public scholarship, and her understanding of public knowledge developed through the lenses of ethnic studies and feminisms.

Thanks for listening.

Are you good to go? Yeah. Perfect.

I'd love for us to begin our conversation by having you share your interest and relationship with public scholarship. How do you understand public scholarship and how do you situate your work within this understanding?

**KC:** So this is a really tricky question for me in some ways because I have come to understand, in the course of my engagement with PublicsLab, that public scholarship as we use it in the PublicsLab world, doesn't actually typically refer to the kind of work that I do, which is the address of the academy as a public or the address of academic publics in part to raise that question: Is there actually a boundary between the university and its social embeddedness? What happens if we continue to try to erode that sense of a boundary?

I think that we need to have a deep recognition that intellectual life happens everywhere. And that some of that takes a shape of academic life, but some of it, a lot of it, most of it, doesn't. And one of our jobs as people *inside* of spaces like the Graduate Center is to try to allow our formal learning to be as thoroughly informed by that which is the informal, non-education, non-institutional learning, as possible. Because it actually makes us smarter. And our job is to become smarter about ideas, about how the world works, about trying to make the world work better for more people.

That's the kind of capacious, baggy sense in which I use public scholarships. So for me, the really... the working definition is anything that is thoughtfully and with study organized toward enhancing all of our lives. That for me is public scholarship

**JA:** I'm wondering how is it that you see the rest of the Graduate Center connect to public scholarship and is there a tension between what we understand public scholarship to be, what we're doing, and what we might be missing in our quest to keep learning?

**KC:** My sense is there's a kind of profound wealth of people who are committed, genuinely committed, to something that we would say is the public good. And that's at every level. I think that there are faculty, I think there are students, I think there are staff, I think there are the people we consider to be service people, right?, who are all kinds of working together to make this building work for the people in it. And *for the people in it* is really capacious. It really is a lot of people who might otherwise not pursue doctoral studies or graduate work.

I do think that there is a tension and that the tension isn't so much necessarily locatable to the Grad Center alone, but rather has to do with the shapes that, public, not even just public, but higher education have taken since the 1970s: Since funding models have shifted, since there is a pretty active, disinvestment in knowledge as a public good, across not just the United States, but probably in, in a sense more globally as well. That for me produces the central tension that we experience in the Grad Center as a building that tries to maintain higher rankings, right?

I'm really aware that education and aesthetic education, the humanities has really participated in producing a world that requires a lot of people to suffer in order for very few to succeed. If education can do that, can't we mobilize it to do other things?

And we've actually seen that, right? We've seen it historically. We've seen it through social movements. We've seen through the transformations in the academy. Through the transformations, you know, in non-academic spaces that are organized around learning. It actually can happen that people can create other ways of living and being together. And that I think is really extraordinary and inspiring. And, you know, that's the sort of work I understand PublicsLab to try to do for us. It's another space and our job is to amplify that everywhere.

**JA:** It's my understanding that you came into PublicsLab first through mentoring [Queenie Sukhadia](#) and I was wondering if you could talk about the relationship you had, how it developed over the years, and what the role of a mentor in PublicsLab was for you.

**KC:** Yeah, so I remember, Queenie was in my intro to Doctoral Studies class. I think it was her first semester, maybe. And she asked if I would be her mentor for this PublicsLab

thing. And I was very frank with her. I said, *you know, this is, I don't actually know what this is. Of course, I'm happy to support whatever you need, but I'm not sure that I can, be actively useful to you.* Queenie had already done all kinds of research and really had a sense of what the possibilities were already in hand said, *that's okay. You know, we'll figure it out together.*

[Rob Yates](#) was also part of that cohort. And Rob was also in English, and also in that class, so I felt some sense of comfort because I knew them. I was like, *okay, you know, they are interesting and smart and, and uh, kind of well-reasoned people, right? Like they want to do interesting things in the world that I want to, I wanna participate in.* So that was really my entry into it.

Throughout, in many ways, I feel like I was there to be a sounding board for Queenie largely, and then in the [English] program itself, to try to make sure that there weren't obstacles in her way. So that there wouldn't be any kind of, um, barriers to her pursuing what PublicsLab could bring for her.

We actually had a cohort of people who were interested in the project *what does academic education, what does an English PhD look like if we don't think only of the academy as its horizon?* That was really just the kind of broad, broad question that we had. So we organized ourselves into a group and applied for one of those [DCEG] grants. And Queenie was part of that, so was Rob. So it has always felt collaborative, and it has always felt very much like I was learning along the way.

Ultimately I ended up directing Queen's dissertation. My dissertation, advisees, we all meet in a group. When Queenie knew that she wanted to get the degree in a particular time, everybody was on board. We read her work at every meeting. So there was that sense that it was kind of a collective, right?, that we were all participating in and excited about these kinds of possibilities. Now, not all of them, were looking beyond the academy as a horizon for jobs, right? Or for their professional lives. But there was never any question about supporting each other for that. And I think that that's a sensibility that, you know, I hope is fostered in, in and through the groups and the ways that we meet. But I think it is also very specific to Queenie having introduced this very particular path for us. So in that way it kind of amplified and proliferated it.

And you know, one of the things I've always done with my advisees is to say *what is your exit strategy, right? If and when the academy doesn't work for you, what are you gonna do? Cause you need to be able to pay your rent. I need people to have a house, like, to have a, a place to live.* So this was another way that we could shift gears and kind open that avenue in a more specific direction.

**JA:** I know that Queenie is working beyond the academic world. In the cohort of dissertation writers, were there people, having seen her trajectory, like did they become interested as well in seeing the different ways that we can apply our scholarship and bridge to a new kind of career?

**KC:** I think there was just always generally a sense of excitement.

Queenie isn't the first of the advisees whom I've worked with, who have decided on a non-academic path post the degree. While it is true, I think that most people who

apply to doctoral programs, especially in English expect to teach along the way, the realities, not just the realities of job market, but also the realities of what the academy is like once you actually get on the ground and figure out, *oh, this is how it operates, these are the kinds of questions, these are the sorts of work that one does 70% of the time and it's not 30%, that you get, you know the sort of encounters with students or whatever*, how could it not shift in some way?

I do think that it was great that Queenie was there as a particular example and model of how this could work but I don't know that it necessarily dramatically shifted anything for our cohort because the conversation was already present in some ways. Now, that being said, I mean, I, I think, you know, it's still always hard to imagine what else you can do, and I really liked that Queenie did something that's actually quite different than the academy, you know?

One of the other realities, and I'm pretty sure I've said this in different contexts with you, Jess, is that we actually need people who can think really well and be committed to the public good everywhere in the world: In every job, in every sector, in every region, right? That's our collective future. Present and also future. In that respect, I have no doubt that what Queenie is bringing to bear and what everyone, you all will bring to bear wherever you are, is some sense of the kind of thoughtfulness and engagement and ability to ask questions about inclusion and exclusion and power and its relationship to what you know and what you don't. And the power of ignorance and how it operates politically and socially and economically. All of that.

**JA:** Can you tell us a bit about the curriculum grant that you went after and how you. You used that within your program?

**KC:** Yeah, sure. I mean, that was really, um, partly that was the generosity of Stacy and Bianca and [Jenny Furlong](#).

I don't even know if I had become EO of English by that time. But, um, [Tanya Agathocleous](#), who worked with me as a DEO of what used to be called placement, we just call it job searching now and [Matt Gold](#), another faculty member, were making these renovations in our departmental curricula, in our admissions practices and in our faculty appointments, really to address what had turned into a super over-representation of whiteness, a super over-representation of a certain category of older white man who dominated our faculty.

Part of what we were trying to do in revisiting the curriculum was to say, *actually, does literary history make sense as a model for us? For the Grad Center?* We didn't have distribution requirements, we really just only have the one requirement, which is the Intro class. There was already a lot of flexibility and affordance. So, we wanted to make sure that the courses we were offering really made sense for our students and really made sense for us as a faculty.

So as part of that conversation, we asked Stacy and Bianca and Jenny if they would meet with us to talk a little bit about what is this public scholarship thing and is this something that we want to integrate into our thinking around the curricular transformation. How do we want to be setting the terms of what English doctoral studies looks like, not following, what other schools are doing or what other, um,

certainly what other private schools are doing, but really saying, *we're the Grad Center, what should we be doing right*. And they were so incredibly helpful.

They were incredibly helpful in terms of thinking about dissertations. Like, how could they be differently organized if we don't actually only think about the academy? Or, what happens if we introduce the idea of alternate careers or alternate career paths not at the last year of somebody's degree, but actually in the first year? You know, how might that shift things? How might our exam structures change? Right? What might this mean in terms of fellowship opportunities or how we value internships or, things like that, that we actually didn't, just hadn't thought about it as English faculty.

So that laid the groundwork for us applying for the grant and we really wanted to make sure that Rob and Queenie were a part of it because they were actually the people who are taking the lead for us in some ways, right?

And we did, we were actually really effective with that, that curricular grant. We changed our first exam so we no longer have it as a kind of exam model. We now say, share whatever piece of writing that you would like to. It can be addressed to academic publics, it can be non-academic publics, it can be anything but creative writing. We decided that it was too difficult for people to have a conversation around that. Two faculty members meet with their students. They talk about how you might shape this for publication for different places. What this might look like as a future. The only way that you cannot pass that is if you don't submit it. So that was a major shift.

We've started a conversation around the dissertation. We already had students doing dissertations that were non-traditional. Digital has been such an important part of what, what our program has done anyway. But there's absolutely space for other things to emerge. And I think that a lot of our faculty are really excited about it. You know? How nice it is to actually be able to reengage with ideas in a different way and toward a different end, given that, you know, the world has shifted.

**JA:** Thinking of re-engagement, one of the wonderful things I find from PublicsLab is that it is a great example of performing publicness within the Graduate Center. You as a mentor were in a cohort with professors from a variety of disciplines from Criminal Justice to Musicology... And I'm so interested in the insights or just even the conversations that you were having about public scholarship or about PublicsLab and what as your own cohort you were learning.

**KC:** That's such a great question. I mean, some of it was honestly, um, it was revelatory. Because I kind of thought... English as a discipline has a reputation for being incredibly staid and conservative and difficult to shift. I think that's probably true as a discipline. But at the Grad Center it's not, I think. There has been always a kind of energy to it, whatever its legacies are. But I came to have much more appreciation for that speaking with some of my faculty colleagues in PublicsLab. Because I came to understand that many other disciplines are still very entrenched in models of what scholarly rigor look like, what a purpose for doctoral education looks like. Even the idea of having a conversation around curriculum that has to do with faculty appointments and admissions organized to the address of the overrepresentation of

whiteness, all of that felt like... I was surprised. I just kept being surprised. *Really you can't talk about that?*

You know, there were certain specific conversations I was able to have that, I think by sharing insight into what was happening in English, it might have helped various units also have a sense of what was possible there. Each program has to kind of operate within its own procedures and its by-laws... But that was really useful and that actually put me into a contact with a lot of people in the building that I think I wouldn't have otherwise known.

That was really helpful to understanding the students in the program, right? What the difficulties or the challenges... even just what the situatedness was for everyone who's participating in it with the faculty.

I think though my... So I always enjoy talking with my faculty colleagues, but for me, the biggest payoff was getting to know, the student work. And getting to know the, the expansiveness and breadth and both the specificity, but also the creativity and the kind of, I don't know to put it, just commitment of time and energy to really developing something that was extraordinary. That is something that I hadn't seen before. That I didn't know was possible to do while you're a grad student. Possible to do a period, but also, especially while you're a grad student, right? Because there's so many other demands. There's really bad pay. All of those things that are constraining. So, it's both like a kind of an enjoiner to, to try to better circumstances, but also really, appreciation for what can happen when people actually have to work under constraints.

It's never been the case that people don't do those things, you know? And so that's a really important reminder, I think, especially when everything feels like it's impossible. I say actually, *people live in possibilities all the time*. And I did find that profoundly moving in a kind of intellectually energizing way in talking with, with all of you on a regular basis.

I think the other thing that I discovered about our faculty across the board is some sense that there is a need to try to find each other across our units because sometimes there is a sense of isolation of like, yeah, I wanna support Jess in doing this thing, but I don't really know how to create that space. You know, how do you make the elbow room necessary for that to be possible? And sharing strategies or just trying to be a, a kind of a receiver of like, yeah, I really wanna work, work this, and it's not, it's not working here, so what else can we do? That seemed really helpful.

**JA:** I have this next question which I hope makes sense. I was listening to, it was really wonderful, I spent a few days listening to different conversations that you've had both within the GC and beyond. And, in listening to several conversations, I'm struck by and I'm inspired by your thoughts on mutuality and collectivity, and seeing one aspect of your role as guiding scholars towards these concepts. I'm wondering, within reflecting back on your time as both a mentor and the Interim Faculty lead of PublicsLab, how you describe or identify the mutuality that was happening between PublicsLab fellows and between us as a group.

**KC:** I think mutuality is as a pedagogy about what I often refer to in my classes as a willingness to be wrong. And if you're willing to be wrong, then you are vulnerable and then you are open, and then you actually can listen to other people and take in, and it's sustaining in that way.

I really felt like that was the kind of ethos certainly that Stacy and Bianca were moving toward and had established when I stepped in as Faculty Lead. The notion that there were, that everything there was collaborative, which was not to say that we were always going to agree on things, but that we were going to come back to the table even if we disagreed. And that for me is the key.

**JA:** Absolutely.

So PublicsLab ended and we are all at different timelines within the Graduate Center and there wasn't necessarily a transition out. I'm wondering, if you were to think of us transitioning from being in the Lab and then being enfolded back into the Graduate Center, what would you hope that we take with us both for ourselves, but also like in, in that sense of mutuality, how to share that with the GC and beyond?

**KC:** You know, it's funny to think about it having ended, funny in that I think I hadn't thought about it in those terms. I recognize that the formal structures have come to a close. I think the thing I would wanna say is that... the biggest takeaway... Right?... Isn't it? That PublicsLab... that's just always what we're doing, you know, in some sense. And to try to make that specific and real and material, right? I think a lot of the knowledge that you can share is actually not that dissimilar from what faculty share, which is, *hey, there is a way to work around that. Hey, it is actually okay to not think about the academy as the only horizon, and here is, here are other students who you could talk to about that, but here is also other faculty who can help you navigate. And here are, different workarounds.* The credentializing mechanism that is our university... There are ways to work in and through it, to try to get to a place where we get to do the work that we wanna do now.

You know, there is also part of me also wants to say do your exams. Keep your head down, do your work. Recognize that doing that is actually going to allow you to get to a place where you can then help other people who are wanting to do non-academic public facing work. Figure out how to shape their exams and do their work and talk to those people, you know? It's okay to not always be thinking about it because it's always present, right? The mutuality is always present. And then just sort of checking in as you are developing your projects and developing your work.

I also think though, you know, to the extent that there are Curriculum Committees that you can participate in [DSC](#), you know, all of these kinds of broader institutional formations, it's helpful to keep that conversation going.

**JA:** One last question. I wanna frame this again by just sharing all that you've done and been for PublicsLab. So, you've been a Faculty Mentor, you've been Interim Faculty Lead, you've been a PI for one of the PublicsLab curriculum grants. Are there particular kinds of institutional changes that you've seen as a result of the PublicsLab, and where do you think there is work yet to be done to support public scholarship within the Graduate Center.



**KC:** I think... Certainly, at the program level, I can say there have been specific institutional changes and not just the English program, but I think, for example, the [History program](#) I know has established different protocols, et cetera. And I have no doubt that that's true in other places as well.

With the, with the ending of [Mellon funding](#), the fellowship structure of PublicsLa... that's the part that has really come to a close. So that has felt really important as an institutional, acknowledgement, recognition, even celebration, right? Of the fact that this is actually an important part of what we do curricularly. I would love to see the institution continue to make those priorities available.

I don't know what shape that should necessarily take. The ideal would be for us to be integrating this into our fellowship structures broadly, right? Not, not taking away the fellowships that are already there, but enhancing that, you know, adding to it. So that this isn't a zero-sum game, this is actually a supplemental kind of concern or consideration.

And then organizing that through units that makes sense, right? It has to be above the level of the program in order for there to be an interdisciplinary conversation. A lot of the work that you guys are doing is actually interdisciplinary and so far, as it doesn't really reside comfortably within a narrowly confined, disciplinary protocol. I think that those changes would be great.

And I think that those are shifts, infrastructural, institutional shifts that have to correlate to... Remember we started talking about the, what I was talking about as a sort of contradiction or tension between the need for us to be highly ranked and the need for us to fulfill our mission? I want us to skew back toward the mission.

Now, I know that there is a kind of, I've said this in other contexts and people say, *but we can't get funding for the, for the university with that*. So, our collective project needs to be, to figure out how to shift that, right shift the idea that public education is in fact necessary for everyone's welfare and for the welfare of the planet.

I have some, maybe misplaced optimism around that. Sometimes I think about those, you heard that statistic, like one out of every 10 New Yorkers is somehow, related to CUNY, you know, as a graduate of CUNY. By and large, most of them are not gonna be the mega wealthy, right? But boy, if one out of 10 New Yorkers would pitch in a little bit, it could make a difference in terms of... not the funding model, but actually the push toward producing the political. And that's, uh, I'd love for us to, as a whole, as a university, to go in the direction and then we could set the stage, right? We could, we could be setting the terms of what doctoral education is supposed to be, what graduate education is supposed to be, I don't know. Don't you think people would be excited about that?

**JA:** Thank you so much for your time.

**KC:** Thanks Jess.

You can hear more about the grant Professor Chuh references in our series on [Doctoral Curriculum Enhancement Grants](#).



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.