



## **Just Research in Contentious Times: Widening the Methodological Imagination**

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**REVIEWER:** Katherine Johnson is the director of the Peer Leadership course at Cedar Shoals Highschool in Athens, Georgia. She is also a doctoral student in Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia, focusing her research on Youth Participatory Action Research.

Michelle Fine conducted research for thirty years with students who have been displaced from traditional educational spaces. Using ground up methodologies, she forms a realistic picture of marginalized youth experiences in and out of school spaces, by encouraging them to speak truth to power. Through the Critical Youth Participatory Action framework, Fine shows us how educational research transforms policy to shake broken systems. By elevating the voices of marginalized youth, Fine highlights how there is currently a “collective protest and public cataloging of microaggressions and spiked enactments of state and social violence [...] but many are coming out of the shadows and embracing cross-group campaigns for social justice (p. 25).” By centering the voices of students who have been othered by the American system, Fine reflects the oppression they’ve experienced. These chapters include work from over three decades of Fine scholarship, from early inquiry moments that were grounded in ethnographic traditions to more current, interactive forms of collaboration often referred to as YPAR inquiry.

There are seven chapters in this 123-page book. Michelle Fine writes balmy and shockingly blunt prose. Her writing and presentation of profound wisdom from the “rim” or “borderlands” defies academic conventions. Since her wisdom originates in the borderlands, she is accountable to present this resistance with a “wild tongue (p. x)” Her introduction is an auto-ethnography of her childhood growing up in a Jewish immigrant family. Her poetic resistance is grounded in the personal metaphor of her mother who was locked in the house with migraines that grew worse as her father “achieved the American dream” and transitioned them from the “wrong-kind” Jew into “the solid middle class, White-skin privilege (p. 5).” She uses the suffering of her mother as metaphor throughout the book to represent communities that suffer so other communities prosper.

Her personal upbringing causes her to question, “Where in the body, the family, the culture, the nation and in the globe do bodies of sadness swell and fester in the shadow of progress? Where does loss hide away when progress walks in the door (p. 5)?”

In her second chapter, she focuses on the evolution of her work core searching with high school dropouts in New York, and stigmatized Muslim Americans. Fine’s first ethnography began in the 1980s when she interviewed over fifty high school dropouts from an upper west side high school where one in twelve students were dropping out. Fine hadn’t yet learned to ask the community to research with her, why they were being replaced in gentrified neighborhoods. If she led those dropouts to research their situation with a macro-critical lens, they would have asked the right questions, which would have led to a more profound understanding of structural realities. In the 1980s, New York City mass incarceration was in a sharp uptick for the prison industrial complex’s profit. Since marginalized youth are exiles within, they are “careful narrators of their own lives, they are exquisitely positioned analysts of a nation (p. 27).”

Maria Elena Torres, director of the CUNY, co-authors both the 3rd and 6th chapter. Fine and Torres' third chapter is centered around a class action lawsuit in California where underfunded minority students sued the state for better educational funding, in *Williams v California*. Michelle Fine, April Burns, Maria Elena Torre and Yasser Payne researched and interviewed students for a year to prepare to be expert witnesses as a part of the prosecution to demand more resources. They show her how school appearance and funding affect students’ sense of self-worth.

Her fourth chapter is co-authored with Andrew Cory Greene and Sonia Sanchez and is perfectly labelled “Wicked Problems” “Flying Monkeys” and Prec(ar)ious Lives: A Matter of Time.” Fine calls distractions in under-resourced “flying monkeys,” which haunt Title 1 teachers in the “belly of the state.” Frustrations are detailed like a lack of long-term subs in the building or a lack of time students have for lunch. The students she interviews describe the everyday chaos and alternative reality of Title 1 education. Meanwhile, the teachers are constantly interrupted on the loud intercom for foolish reasons. Her team concluded that California teachers and students lose 14% of instructional time to these distractions.

Her fifth chapter is a review of the history of critical youth participatory action research under the manifesto “no research on us without us (p. 75).” She pays honor to Martin Baro, a Jesuit priest, who died while encouraging youth to bear witness to state-born atrocities on their lives in El

Salvador. Here, Fine jumps into the qualitative methodologies of the Public Science Project of the Graduate Center CUNY, and how they cocreate surveys and research with “othered” communities, she explains, “We stay close to the messy grounds where the heavy footprints of policy can be found on historically silenced and bruised bodies. With mistakes, hiccups, awkward moves across fault lines of power, race, class, and position[...] expertise is widely distributed but legitimacy is not; but those who have experienced injustice have a particularly acute understanding of the affects (p. 80).” Fine shows new researchers how to step into critical research with youth and the mistakes one may make along the way.

Her final chapter six Chapter, “Speaking Words of Wisdom; Metabolizing Oppression into Intersectional Activism, Radical Wit, and Care Work.” described the process of constructing a national online survey taken by 6000 LGBTQ youth. The survey was constructed by 150 young people who were paid 15\$ an hour for 4 hours in New York City. The survey reframes deficit and disparities research to confirm that suicidal ideation and other “slights on the soul (105)” for instance “stick to some bodies and not others (104).” Young people “do not simply internalize rejection, betrayal or social violence. Instead, they seem to draw strength while living in the borderlands, leaning on activists’ legacies, turning to social media, and joining with activists” This chapter is about giving those in the LGBTQ community the ability to build mirrors, so the world will see their reflection (109) through radical wit and imagination. This final chapter highlights the methodological shifts in Fine decades as an educational researcher-- to work that dignifies research participants investments in time and knowledge production, toward more YPAR focused goals.

The titles of the book and chapters adequately describe the contents of the work, as she often uses terms coined by the youth researchers in her ethnographic interviews, such as “flying monkeys” to describe neoliberal distractions in schools. In this way, the title of her book are counternarratives that can only come from true Critical Youth Participatory Action Research.

Educational scholars may want to recreate her research methods in the classroom but struggle to know the ins and outs of her qualitative inquiry process. Her national LGBTQ ethnographic survey can be found at [whatsyourissue.org](https://whatsyourissue.org). The data on the website and in the book are primarily drawings and poetry from marginalized youth as they try to express how they are ostracized in the schools, and the enormous odds they face. A gallery of their artistic expressions can be found at

whatyourissue.org/gallery. The images and poems often go hand and hand. The youth use different modalities to express what neoliberal forces do to their sense of self-worth.

Even long-term educators of “othered” youth, who are frustrated and burnt out from the constant top down policies that damage young people’s ability to love learning and love themselves should read this work. This book is for educational researchers seeking to step into policy and leadership through the vehicle of advanced degrees, but who often grow frustrated with the wide gap between higher education and the grueling realities of public secondary education in America. This is for teachers who build “circles and not rows” in their classroom, who want to learn as much from their students as from the cannon, and who want to encourage their students to disrupt an unjust educational system. This is for teachers who want to raise up the next leaders who will fashion policies that will transform and enrich their communities. This is for researchers who do not want to hide in the “dusty libraries” of university, but want to infuse knowledge with community leaders who need it most (p. 117).”

Fine poignantly describes how public goods and institutions are under siege, and depicts all the tools to combat neoliberal forces to use political militancy for social change. As “dreams curdle in our midst [...] social scientists have an obligation to bear witness, forge solidarities, craft collective inquiry [...] for teaching in the university and on the streets (p. 119).” Fine articulates the sinews of neoliberal destruction and bridges the gap between the street and the university, giving educators encouragement to help their students build mirrors to reflect both the wounds and “radical wit” of their existence.