

Tanya: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya: This week's guest, Dr. Michelle Fine, a distinguished professor of critical psychology, women's studies, American studies, and urban education at The Graduate Center. She is also the co-founder of the Public Science Project, and her primary research interest is the study of social justice when injustice appears as fair or deserved, when it is resisted, and how it is negotiated by those who pay the most serious price for social inequities. She studies these issues in public high schools, prisons, and with youth in urban communities using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Fine is known for her groundbreaking research through the framework of participatory action, research, and studies of social injustice and resistance. Her work at the Public Science Project is emblematic of this approach of traditional subjects of research becoming partners in the research.

Tanya: Welcome, Michelle.

Dr. Michelle: Thank you, Tanya.

Tanya: Throughout your academic career, you have done significant research on youth activism and identity formation. What has your research and ongoing engagement yielded to you on the state of LGBTQ children in American schools today?

Dr. Michelle: Thanks for asking me. It's obviously a timely topic, although it would be timely at any point, but right now we're in a kind of bipolar moment where on the one hand there's a real assault on transgender youth, LGBTQ rights, perversely in the name of religious freedom. At the same time, there's an explosion of LGBTQ youth activism and solidarity movements with Black Lives Matters, UndocuQueer, Muslim-American Young People. We're living through a time where the assault is heightened but the resistance is also heightened. I would say across 30 years of doing research with young people, there are a couple of takeaways maybe: one is that young people who sit at their margins of their high schools and our communities often have a deep, critical, thoughtful, and engaged critique of existing institutions, but also desire to be a part of those institutions. The critique is not instead of a yearning to belong, but the yearning to belong is not a desire for assimilation or simply to be accepted as if one doesn't notice their differences. LGBTQ youth, like youth of color, like Muslim-American young people, are today insisting on both a redistribution of opportunities, but what some would call a "justice of recognition," an insistence that they are recognized for who they are.

Dr. Michelle: As you probably know, LGBTQ young people are disproportionately activists at the current moment. They are at the front of Black Lives Matter, UndocuQueer, Fight for 15, prison abolition, The Dreamers. It's kind of astonishing, and at the same time, they're very vulnerable to discrimination, particularly in public institutions, in school and by police.

Tanya: It is an interesting time, and I would add that the way you're pointing out is that these young people who identify as "queer" in many different ways, but we can say "queer" in the situation, we always have said in LGBT movement that we have all these different identities and the rainbow flag is evidence of it, but this constellation, this cohort is saying, "Oh, we are many things. We are many things, and we want to talk about it, we want to be all those things." There's also a reaction within the movement where [inaudible 00:05:04] say to some colleagues and friends, "Well this is not the movement that you grew up with."

Dr. Michelle: No, but it is the movement you birthed. That is-

Tanya: Interesting point, interesting point.

Dr. Michelle: The activist LGBTQ movement of the '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s has now given birth to an intersectional movement that in many cases refuses the narrow categories that your generation, my generation helped to create. They resist the binaries that we have inscribed, and they insist on intersectional identities and solidarities. They don't separate queer justice from racial justice. They don't separate reproductive justice from racial justice. They don't separate the struggle of undocumented immigrants to a home from struggles against gentrification or even queer youths' rape to a home. We've been writing with LGBTQ youth who, as you say, many call themselves "queer," at least in the New York area, but we've been writing about them as having a willful subjectivity, a desire to be known even if the category of recognition is one that is suffering from stigma. There is a kind of an insistence on "know me for who I am, do not code me for what I am not."

Tanya: That's really very interesting. It's also inspiring too, to see people take it to a whole different place, but when you're in an institution like a school, how do they maneuver that system? We talk an awful lot in the community about the police pipeline to prison for queer youth. I'm just going to use "queer" in a general sense-

Dr. Michelle: Go ahead, sure.

Tanya: Because everybody's got lots of ideas about who they are. I don't have the ability to do that here, but recognizing that they're in school, and many schools, for example, here in New York City, they have police so that when you enter the school, you go through detectors to see if you have a knife or a gun on you. You have this police presence in schools, which is very abnormal I think, and then you have children who are saying, "Well no, I'm not this white kid from

Riverdale. I'm an African-American queer justice advocate who isn't liking what's going on in this school room right now."

Dr. Michelle: Yeah. Let me unpack some of that. There are white queer youth in Riverdale, just to be clear for the listeners, and there are some police in the schools who have been very supportive of young people, particularly at places like the Harvey Milk School where the school safety officers are embraced by the school culture as part of the school, and they are some of the young people saying, "Wait, that's my grandpa," while other young people in more traditional, big comprehensive high schools where they're talking through metal detectors talk about the incredible racism, homophobia, and classism that they experience just entering the building. As you point out, we have 5,000 New York City police officers in New York City schools that would be the fifth largest police department in the country if it were its own police department. They respond to and are accountable to the police department, not the Department of Education. When they arrest a young person and a teacher tries to intervene, there have been a number of occasions where both the student and the teacher have been removed in handcuffs, teachers being arrested for interfering with arrests. That's for queer youth or other youth.

Dr. Michelle: To return to your earlier point, I think on the one hand, we have young people who are very relentless in their commitment to expressing themselves for who they are, and they pay an enormous price in some schools for transgressing the gender norms. The levels of hate crimes, the levels of bullying, the levels of intimidation are extraordinarily high for queer youth across race and ethnicity. What we find, however, is that in schools and in treatment with the police, young people of color who are also queer have far worse outcomes than white queer young people, and on other indicators there are no differences. Fights with families, disagreements with friends, desire to be an activist, commitment to the arts. No difference, but once the hands of the states are involved, race really matters in making life quite precarious for queer youth of color. What we also have found is given the unbelievably high rates of homelessness among queer youth, once you are homeless, once you are out of your family's home, which might be for very good reasons; might be to save you, there's an avalanche of negative consequences.

Dr. Michelle: You're more likely to drop out of school. You're more likely to be on the streets. You're more likely to end up in police custody. You're more likely to have mental health issues. You're more likely to think about suicide, and you're more likely to experience violence.

Tanya: This is a ubiquitous problem in New York. When you look at the large cities from New York to LA to Seattle to Denver, San Diego, it averages about 35% to 40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ.

Dr. Michelle: That's right, that's right.

Tanya: In many times, they're thrown out of their homes because of religious bigotry. This is a problem for everybody everywhere. One of my questions to you, we know that we have good friends at organizations like [Gilson 00:11:39], but they're looking at kids in school. They're not really studying kids that are on the street that are homeless. This is an issue that even if you're white, you're extremely vulnerable, and we know that children then engage in unsafe sex and that they're actually engaging in prostitution to feed themselves. There are thousands and thousands of children like this in America, and yet, the solution probably should be sought locally, but we also know that most of the national gay organizations, advocacy organizations aren't talking about these issues.

Dr. Michelle: Right.

Tanya: As a matter of fact, I think that some of the people that you have been researching with have said, "Well marriage equality doesn't affect me. I'm 15 years old. This is a non-issue." I take some umbrage with the national organizations for not really pushing this. In Massachusetts, you think of it being very pro-LGBTQ, and yet there's only like 100 beds for homeless LGBTQ youth in the state of Massachusetts. Some horrible figure like that, it's shocking. What does research say about this, and what do you say about this as a human being, Michelle?

Dr. Michelle: You're exactly right; from our research, we have, unfortunately, been able to demonstrate that homelessness is a queer justice issue, that mental health support is a queer justice issue, that police violence and aggressive policing, over-incarceration, over-deportation, the criminalization of immigrants, these are queer justice issues. I'm sorry to say, as with white feminism, white elite LGBTQ groups have failed to address the full range of race, class, gender, sexuality issues that are affecting the most vulnerable members of their community. Part of why we are committed to "no research on us without us" is that we always have the most marginal individuals from any project, from any group working alongside the research team as part of the research team defining the parameters of "what are we studying? What's the shape of the problem?" Were it not for the queer youth researchers of color, we would not have done a big study that included mass incarceration, the criminalization of undocumented youth, homelessness, foster care.

Dr. Michelle: In Arizona, there's a group known as Foster By Gay because queer kids growing up in undocumented families end up in the foster care system because they're bringing too much attention to their family. These young people understand what we've called "the circuits of dispossession"; that is, the networks of institutions that betray queer youth, but they also understand "circuits of resistance, the ways in which social movements must be linked to each other. I want to add one more point: from our research, we've been able to demonstrate from a sample of more than 6,000 young people that it doesn't take much for schools to become relatively safe spaces, dignified spaces for queer youth.

Tanya: Yeah, talk about those dignity schools.

Dr. Michelle: Again, we have a national sample of LGBTQ youth from the What's Your Issue project, and they're more than 50% gender expansive or trans. They're almost 40% young people of color. They're from every state in the country, Puerto Rico, and Guam. One of the things that's astonishing is if a young person says that they go to the school where there are out teachers, "out" as lesbian, gay, bi, or trans, where there's a gay/straight alliance or a gender/sexuality alliance where there's anti-discrimination policy, and where sex ed, language arts, and history include LGBTQ material, and where there are counselors that are affirming of queer sexualities. Those kids report much lower rates of bullying, of push out, of suspension, of mental health problems, and of suicidal thoughts. That's astonishing. That's a cheap intervention. How dare we have schools that deny teachers the right to be out. How dare we have schools that do not teach around LGBTQ issues in history or language arts or sex education.

Dr. Michelle: We've done research in a number of schools; the amount of bullying and harassment that LGBTQ young people experience in schools is astonishing. They're often scared to go to school, they drop out of school. If home isn't safe and school isn't safe, they're ending up on the streets.

Tanya: Yeah.

Dr. Michelle: That is not only tragic for them, that is a lost opportunity. This is a generation of young people who are brilliant, who are funny, who are creative, who know how to have full lives with minimal resources, and who are incredibly generous to each other. We've been writing about their radical wit [just because 00:17:31] they're funny. What a lost opportunity for us to not be able to have that generation of young people be fully educated, engaged in K through 12 education but also higher education. What a tragedy that we have undermined those lives by not allowing teachers to be out. For instance, in the south, teachers are highly reluctant to be publicly LGBTQ.

Tanya: Yeah, I mean that-

Dr. Michelle: I don't think it's an overstatement to say we're putting young people's lives in jeopardy.

Tanya: Well yeah, the lack of visibility of people being out. That's why there is a National Coming Out Day. Still, because of the very issues that you're talking about in the south, people being visible, having role models. That's one of the jokes I make, about the fact that Ellen DeGeneres every day at 4:00. So many Americans don't believe or can't conceive of the fact that you could be fired for being gay, which is a reality in over half the states of the country. Now, we have a xenophobic, authoritarian president who's backed up by one of the most hateful vice presidents with a special focus of his oppression on LGBTQ people. I think one of the most remarkable photos I've seen recently was where the new

senator from Alabama's son, openly gay son, was holding the Bible when he swore in. It seemed that Vice President Pence had all kinds of emotions in that moment, but I think it's a wake up call.

Tanya: The community has gone through this before, many times, where we've had figures in the government that really, really hated the community. People will have no choice but to fight back against what the government may or may not decide to do with respect to queer youth, and obviously we're looking at [inaudible 00:20:06] youth as well. It's just really reprehensible, but as you say, it is a moment where people are really coming out, saying who they are, saying, "This is who I am. Embrace me, take it or leave it," and yet at the same time, they're being met by unbelievable oppression that's coming out of the current political situation.

Dr. Michelle: Yeah. I think there's lots of evidence that hate crimes are up, that in school and cyber-bullying, all those terrible statistics are up at the same time. At University of North Carolina when there was a move to close the LGBTQ center, the first folks to show up in solidarity was the Muslim-American students, second group was Black Lives Matter. There are new solidarities emerging.

Tanya: That's very inspirational.

Dr. Michelle: I think this generation is just filled with a sense of an insistence on their human rights, but more than that, they do to want to assimilate into existing institutions; they're insisting that those institutions-

Tanya: Change.

Dr. Michelle: Transform.

Tanya: Change, absolutely. I don't want to get into a lot of detail, but you and your colleague [Maria Torey 00:21:29] have been engaged in this two-year research project on What's Your Issue, and we're going to really talk about that again, but a lot of your data's coming out of this research. Secondly, you're being funded by Ford Foundation on this. One of the things I say about the movement is, I hope the foundations get behind the multiple identity movements because I think a lot of them weren't getting it, that the queer community, they're also working on the environment or they're working on social justice for immigrants because they are gay and they are an immigrant and they are interested in the environment. It seems like the foundations weren't getting out, so they weren't funding the organizations but it seems like there's a shift now. There's a shift out of that.

Dr. Michelle: I think that's exactly right, that funding and laws and organizing and policies and research are all recognizing that we can hold onto the complexity of human beings and still agitate along these more traditional vectors of social oppression. I would say it's, I call these "revolting times" because on the one hand, they're

revolting, and on the other hand, so are we. Also, young people are rejecting the very categories of identity politics that I think our generation relied upon, and I think that it's a transitional moment where on the one hand, we want to respect the contestation of categories, and on the other hand, we want to persist both in law and in social research and in organizing and recognizing that African-Americans, queer folks, undocumented young people, Muslim-Americans, each of those categories, while they might not narrowly fit one's self-identity, those are the vectors upon which the right-wing is launching its assault. We have to be working at two levels at once: honoring the complexity that young people use to narrate and embody their movements, but also keep an eye on these more "traditional" vectors of state violence and injustice, which our generation knows well.

Tanya: This is a good place to stop. We're going to keep talking about this, and we'll follow your research with a great deal of interest. I want to thank you for being with us today.

Dr. Michelle: Thank you, Tanya.

Tanya: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Professor Michelle Fine of The Graduate Center.

Tanya: The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNYTV, located at The Graduate Center in the heart of New York City with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.