

Professor Michelle Fine Discusses Solidarities and the Movement from Racial and Social Justice Protests to Action



Professor Michelle Fine

Distinguished Professor [Michelle Fine](#) (Psychology, Urban Education, Women’s and Gender Studies), growing up as the youngest child of working–class Jewish immigrants from Poland, spent her early years observing white suburbia from the margins — and came to recognize how her family’s whiteness enabled their economic mobility and cultural integration. “My father sold plumbing supplies, and racial capitalism was good to him: He embodied the spirit of progress and assimilation, while my mother took to bed, often, with migraines, as she held the depression and sadness of loss,” Fine says. “I metabolized both and became an activist, and a scholar, dedicated to understanding, interrupting, and transforming conditions of injustice, allied always with movements for change.”

Fine is the co–founder of the [Public Science Project](#) (PSP), one of the research groups in The Graduate Center’s [Center for Human Environments](#), and has collaborated closely — using an approach known as participatory action research — with community organizations, youth, and currently and formerly incarcerated women. She spoke to The Graduate Center about the recent protests for social justice, her current projects, and the obligations of those who have benefited from white privilege, particularly scholars.

The Graduate Center: Do you see this as an inflection point? And are you surprised at all with what’s happening?

Fine: I think that the current moment is equal parts a grotesque public display of state violence against communities of color, and a vibrant uprising for racial justice led by young African American activists and community members, joined in solidarity by white and Indigenous and queer and Muslim and Asian American and Latinx folks across generations.

There’s also a movement from protest to action, like we see in New York City: re–imagining the NYPD, reallocating funds toward communities of color and schools. A lot of that comes

after some powerful, longstanding community organizing and public-facing scholarship, including at The Graduate Center, with scholars being led by local community-based surveys, analyses of city budgets, and demands for changes and law.

This moment is not surprising. It's time we confronted the fissures created by gross inequity. I think they were magnified in some ways by the collective sense of vulnerability created by COVID. People had time to reflect, bear witness, and do some soul-searching. We cannot go back to the normal before COVID: a deeply racist, homophobic, sexist time in our history.

GC: The Public Science Project, which you co-founded with Professor [María Elena Torre](#) (Psychology), has done so much work on these issues, including police reform. What are you working on now?

Fine: María Torre and I have been working with a coalition of formerly incarcerated women, lawyers, and currently incarcerated women, trying to identify who in prison is deeply vulnerable to COVID because of age or medical condition, and generating a list of names to move under Governor Cuomo's eyes for potential release. And we're also working to help women in prison apply for eligibility under DVSJA: the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act, which is an incredible piece of legislation.

New York is the first state that enables women who are currently incarcerated, and who committed their crimes while they were experiencing domestic violence, to have their cases retried (there are lots of caveats) with an understanding that experiencing violence and coercion might be a mediating condition for how they got into prison. This law is the outcome of long-standing struggles by women in prison, activists, and organizers. We are now working with a core advisory group of formerly incarcerated women, lawyers, activists, and students from the Psychology Department, Professor [Kate Mogulescu](#) of Brooklyn Law School, and the Gender and Women's Studies program at The Graduate Center to create a massive database of 487 women, who are currently incarcerated, and to examine any evidence that domestic violence was in their lives, either in the legal documents or in the newspaper coverage.

We are working to link those women with social workers, advocates, and lawyers so they can re-craft the narratives that were told about them in a way that more accurately takes domestic and intimate violence into account in their histories. For most incarcerated women, domestic violence has been a pathway to prison.

GC: Last year, you gave a talk titled "Thinking About Whiteness, Our Obligations in an Era of Rising White Nationalism." What do you see as those obligations, particularly in the current moment?

Fine: This is a moment where white people in general, and white academics in particular, I would say, have an obligation to think through how we allow and invite our colleagues of color or students of color to take the lead, and also stand in solidarity with the demands they're making of the academy, of our schools, of our economy, of our legislators. And even those of us who want to think "I'm not that kind of white person" — we're all in it. We might not all be white supremacists, but we are all benefiting from a system of white privilege. I get welcomed every morning by the same police who might be assaulting the young people of color that I work with in New York. I can walk into a bank and get a loan in a way that many of my colleagues and friends who are struggling economically would have a harder time getting a loan.

I think that white scholars, educators, and mentors have an obligation to think hard not just about racism, but also about undue privilege. I live in Montclair, New Jersey, and within our desegregated school system there's clearly evidence of racism against children of color in the schools (as is true of all school systems), but there's also cumulative privilege that comes to white people, assumptions about who their children are or will be, even differential resources that are allocated when a child is identified as in need of special ed. In structural ways and small intimate ways, whiteness affects how educational institutions and the academy have been organized; it is time to decolonize, cleanse, and transform.

GC: The Public Science Project also does a lot of work on LGBT issues. What did you think of the Supreme Court's recent decision on LGBT rights in the workplace?

Fine: The Supreme Court's decisions are remarkable in the same way that the solidarities and the protests are remarkable. I do think that most people in this country would like there to be more justice around gender, around sexuality, around race, around immigration, around class.

There are amazing solidarities happening on the ground. These are not competing movements. And now it's moving, not toward reform or commissions to think about it, but toward real change — legal change and reallocation of city, state, federal budgets. I think this is a really hopeful moment even as we bear witness to the painful history of class stratification, state violence against communities of color, Islamophobia and transphobia, and the systematic starvation of CUNY in the name of austerity. CUNY is an institution born of passion and struggle. Within The Graduate Center, and CUNY at large, we view racial justice, educational justice, and labor justice as one intersectional movement for our students and our staff, and for the city.

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