

## Participatory Designs for Critical Literacies from Under the Covers

Michelle Fine, Critical Psychology and Urban Education  
The Graduate Center of the City University of New York

### Abstract

This chapter invites a conversation about how critical participatory research transforms the production of knowledge; enables a complex chronicling of counter-stories and nurtures the contestation of dominant narratives with the very people who have been misrepresented as Others. Through a series of research stories fomented in prison, courtrooms, and social movements, I hope to incite a provocative imagination for critical research “to be of use” in a moment of neoliberal gentrification of educational studies.

Keywords: participatory action research; critical policy analysis; epistemological violence; counterstories

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1956, New Jersey: Each morning, before I was old enough to attend school, my three and then four and five year old eyes followed as Daddy, Sherry, and Richard left for America. From my TV perch with a bowl of sugary cereal in my lap, I watched, as I cared for and was cared for by my mother, in bed, often riddled with headaches. Later in the day she would emerge and together we would watch as Penny negotiated life on *As the World Turns* and Jane Wyman paraded as Mother in *Father Knows Best*. The wet shmatta (Yiddish: rag) on her head carried the secrets of generations of women – their desires and losses. My mother called our home “the cemetery.” I often wondered how many of us were buried there.

In 1921, my parents sailed as children on separate disease-infected and dream-infused boats, from Poland to the ‘green lady’ in New York harbor; with and without parts of their families who knew too well the price of living through a pogrom.

Seven-year-old Rose Hoffer, my mother, was the baby of an orthodox Jewish family of 18, or 16, or 15 births – depending on who was counting, and who was counted. She came to Ellis Island accompanied by two brothers, a sister and her 55- year-old mother, “Who knows how old she was? No one from Europe knows how old they are!”

At age seven, Jack Yankelovich (which became Fine at Ellis Island) also traveled to the U.S., Harlem in fact, with his grandmother. This was four years after he was “given up” by his young widowed mother whose second husband “didn’t want a child who wasn’t his own.”

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“How did you feel about that Dad?” asks the aspiring psychologist baby daughter of Rose and Jack, circa 1975, just entering graduate school. “Never thought about it honey.”

Years later, my father would learn that his mother, stepfather and stepbrothers would eventually be killed, left behind in the Polish ghettos to be crushed under Nazi boots. As we stood in the exhibit hall at Dachau, I watched him study the photos closely. I touched his arm, he look startled, “I was looking for my mother.”

That was it. My father never spoke pain or sadness. Driven and passionate, he was thoroughly dedicated to a better life for us. This amazing, proud man had a laser-like focus on the future. No rear view mirror. Narrating a life of blissful mobility, his capillaries quietly filled with the cholesterol of denial (or chicken fat), eventually – at age 85 - choking his heart.

In most households we find a social psychological diaspora of affect distributed across bodies. Some carry and speak the unbearable weight of loss; others bury, deny and silence, marching to the tune of progress.

I make no judgment about which is less healthy.

The youngest chubby child, lucky to be born when the family financial profile was approaching a middle class smile, always a watcher and a performer, I tracked my mother’s migraines that moved deeper and deeper into her body as our family “made it.” She would embody what the rest of us were forbidden to speak.

I was too young to ask: Where does loss hide when progress waltzes through the door?

My life is a double helix of dominant stories of mobility, twisted with whispers of sadness and loss, wrapped in a Teflon of whiteness, born into America at a moment “When the Jews Became White” (Brodkin, 1998).

I learned about stories from my mother; she held them in silence and spoke them in tears. On her deathbed she told me it was my job to speak these stories to the world.

And so in this essay I write toward a critical bifocality, recognizing that every dominant story of progress shadows a subaltern story of pain and betrayal, refusing to dissociate the moans of latter from the glories of the former. And I migrate this fractured consciousness, this hybrid line of vision into questions of epistemology, methodology, design, and research justice.

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“War is peace.  
Freedom is slavery.  
Ignorance is strength.”  
— George Orwell, 1984  
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In public education, as in all sectors of public life, we witness today a rising dominant story circulate in the media even as those of us who teach, research and parent know, in our bellies, the contrasting reality of life on the ground for children and educators toiling in the soil of poverty, under-investment, racial (in)justice, and anti-immigrant xenophobia. Headlines announce the miracles of corporate education reform, testing, charters, teacher evaluation, school closings, Teach for America, as the public sector undergoes a well-funded racialized and classed makeover at the nexus of liberal education reform. Narratives about the failure of public schools and teachers, the “tragedy of the illiterate” Black child and the “linguistic deficits” of Latino children circulate as scientific evidence, justifying school closings, heightened scrutiny of teachers, more testing and the homogenization of a whitestream curriculum. Neither higher education nor professional organizations have been immune to this neoliberal logic. Often we have been complicit in enforcing metric madness. Like public universities at large, graduate schools of education experience enormous pressure to bear Right, and most turn on their blinkers. While faculty at many universities including Arizona, Wisconsin, CUNY, Rutgers, U Mass, and Texas, have vocally challenged high stakes testing, edTPA, Common Core, Eurocentric curriculum, charter expansion, and public school closings, racism and Islamophobia on campus, they been met by harassment from corporate reform groups, state legislators and/or university administrators. Entrance into teacher education programs has become more test-based and “competitive”; progressive pedagogies are taught at elite schools while more mechanized, online, alternative routes degrees are on Tag Sales at public universities. The racialized/classed implications are enormous for whitening and gentry-fying our teaching force, segregating who receives a rich, critical, inquiry based foundation in progressive, multi-cultural curriculum and pedagogy and who is being trained in drill and kill.

While many are writing obituaries on the slow death of public education, I prefer to cast the present as a deep, critical, and contentious moment in educational history. There are many stories to tell, although most of our institutions and funding agencies would like to us comply with the dominant li(n)e. I resist seeing the shift to the Right as absolute or inevitable; I take courage from Gloria Anzaldúa who would remind us that all rivers that flow at the borderlands of nations and historic moments carry multiple contradictory currents (1987). I lean on Deleuze and Guattari (1987) who would catalogue the struggles for democratic, multiracial, anti-racist public education as an *assemblage of moving parts*. Globally and nationally, we swim in white waters of neoliberal logic and financial pressure to conform and yet we are buoyed by waves of resistance and surprising solidarities among labor, educators, parents, activists, and youth dedicated to educational, racial, and labor justice as though they were wholly compatible. Consider: the hunger strikes, encampments and football team resistance that forced the President to resign at University of Missouri; teachers in Seattle refused to administer their high stakes standardized test and prevailed; high school student members of the Newark Student Union occupied the Superintendent’s office for 72 hours and eventually she resigned; the number of states implementing the Common Core PARCC exam is down to a handful from the original 24; teacher evaluation has been decoupled from student test scores across the country. Alternative assessments are being developed in

New Hampshire, New York, and California. In 2015, 500,000 opted out of high stakes tests; more than 800 high-end universities do not require SAT/ACT. Black Lives Matter, Climate Justice and the Fight for 15 have galvanized thousands. Across k–12 and higher education, energetic, courageous, and dedicated sweat equity coalitions of educators, youth, community members, activists, and researchers are stitching together solidarity movements enriched by radical differences, for racial, immigrant, economic, sexual, and disability justice. And yet as progressives mobilize, corporate reformers, like a voracious, insatiable virus, mutate and reboot.

We must be wary of a turn toward what might be called a SCARE tactic: Stratified Corporate Assault on Research and Education. Corporate education reformers seem to recognize their broad overreach. By the end of 2015, in a discourse peppered with humility, reconciliation, and the stinging irony of “choice,” “freedom,” and “local control,” there seems to be a strategic splitting of the agenda: a softening in White, wealthy, and suburban communities and an intensified effort to disrupt and dismantle in urban communities.

In urban communities of color, poverty, and immigration, in community colleges and most recently in rapidly expanding public preschools serving low-income children, we witness an accelerated appetite for disruptive innovation, testing, teacher evaluation, reading readiness assessments, charter and cyber-charter expansion, threatened loss of funds for poor metrics. Public schools serving the most disenfranchised students have been stripped of resources, declared “failures,” and then marked for punitive accountability regimes. Many have been shuttered, and others have responded by excluding those students considered most difficult to educate. As Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency...” (1951/73, 316.)

Ripping a page from Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine* (2008), hundreds of schools across the country have been closed in Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Cleveland, Newark, New York.... Since branch libraries have closed, many black neighborhoods have lost the one remaining productive public institution, leaving police and military recruiters to represent “public”(see Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Hundreds of tenured teachers, disproportionately Black and Brown, have been excessed, replaced by short term/contingent usually White educators. In the name of Renaissance 2010, as Pauline Lipman (2011) has so meticulously catalogued, “failing” schools in Chicago flipped to charters; and now failing charters are being flipped to condominiums. In the decade between 2000 and 2010, the CPS faculty has plummeted from 40% to 23% Black. In drag as accountability, choice, parent power and civil rights, an ambitious multi-pronged public-private machine is aggressively testing, policing, branding and segregating children from communities of color.

I make no judgments about parents who seek alternatives from among desperately poor options. I do despair the cynicism of public officials, and private sector financial interests, who loot the public coffers and declare victory.

On the ground, communities under siege are littered with contradictions, desire, betrayal, and pain among impossible choices. As I listen to parents and grandparents attending a Saturday Freedom School in Newark, New Jersey, scared to send their children to the local public school and yet frustrated with charter schools expelling their

children because they have “too many needs,” one grandmother told us that her grandson was “doing remarkably well at the charter school but I am afraid they are making him distrust Black people and want to leave Newark for a boarding school.” These parents are tired of testing but worry there will be no expectations if there are no tests; struggling for community schools in a city being ravaged by corporate take over, trusting neither the corporate carpet baggers nor the State, with few images of what else is possible. Parents find themselves flooded in a sea of troubling options, while the local newspapers declare victory for the charter invasion. In this context, it is easy to hear echoes of James Anderson’s (2014) brilliant analysis of post-emancipation Black education, when communities then, as now, were caught in the crossfires of the “alternative political paths that gripped the Reconstruction Congress” Anderson tells us:

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Initially, ex-slaves attempted to create an educational system that would support and extend their emancipation, but their children were pushed into a system of industrial education that presupposed black political and economic subordination. ...--supported by northern industrial philanthropists, some black educators, and most southern school officials--... Because blacks lacked economic and political power, white elites were able to control the structure and content of black elementary, secondary, normal, and college education during the first third of the twentieth century  
([www.AERA.net/Portals/38/docs/Brown\\_Lecture/2014%20Lecture](http://www.AERA.net/Portals/38/docs/Brown_Lecture/2014%20Lecture))  
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In the remainder of this chapter, I muse about the responsibility of educational research in times of fierce ideological contestation; I want to invite readers to think aloud about how, why, and with whom we design research that can enter and investigate the claims of dominant narratives, lift up counter stories, and dive into the knotty relation between the two as well as generate images of radical possibilities.

In deeply segregated times, educators and educational researchers are among the few who travel between communities, who ride the hyphen between privilege and oppression, who know too well the dominant story and voices from behind the veil.

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### Veils, Hyphens, and Epistemology

Opening the *Souls of Black Folks*, in 1903, Du Bois wrote:

#### **The Forethought**

HEREIN lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line...

Leaving, then, the white world, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,--the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls. All this I have ended with a tale twice told but seldom written, and a chapter of song.

Before each chapter, as now printed, stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs,--

some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past. And, finally, need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?

W. E. B. Du B.  
ATLANTA, GA., Feb. 1, 1903.

Today, as educators and researchers, we know the dominant stories being circulated and those being suppressed: whose voices are loudest and whose are drowned out. We listen as friends and family parrot the prevailing narrative and yet we have seen through the veil, if only for a moment. Perhaps you have struggled on a hyphen of privilege and marginalization, or been intimate with some who live at a precarious edge. I write to your double helix however it got tangled.

In 2012, Lois Weis and I published an essay in which we argued for *critical bifocality* as a matter of epistemology and design, to “render visible the relations between groups to structures of power, to social policies, to history, and to large sociopolitical formations” (325). We advocated research designs that would theorize broadly and interrogate deeply, seeking to understand how “global, national, and local transformations of political economy are insinuated, embodied, and resisted by youth and adults trying to make sense of current educational and economic possibilities in massively shifting contexts” (173). In this chapter, I want to press a little deeper and consider how the production of knowledge shifts when we stand beside, and not above, the teachers, activists, community members, students, and parents in low income communities of color; how our research questions, outcomes and the stories we gather transform when we conduct research *with*, not *on/about/for*, communities under siege.

The remainder of this chapter draws from a range of research collaborations of the Public Science Project (PSP) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a multi-constituency research institute where coalitions of researchers, activists, policy makers, lawyers, everyday people, educators and youth undertake policy research. At PSP we take seriously Ignacio Martin-Baro’s (1996) call for research that challenges what he considered the *dominant lies*, as he was writing in El Salvador. We begin, in each community project, with W.E.B. Du Bois’ (1903) question: *How does it feel to be a problem*, and investigate the structures and historic conditions that produce inequity and how ascriptions of deficit, terror, or damage adhere to some bodies and not others. And we practice what feminist philosopher Sandra Harding described as *strong objectivity*. That is, we build initially fragile, and increasingly sturdy contact zones where diverse knowledges dialogue, drawing on the language of Mary Louise Pratt (1991), developed further as an epistemological project by María Torre (see Torre & Ayala, 2008). We catalogue and pool our varied and dissenting experiences and literacies, what we have experienced, read, seen, witnessed, and what we embody. We share, beckoning back to Paulo Freire (1970), how we each “read the world” and then we stitch together a set of common questions for documenting the consequences of privilege and oppression, revealing their predatory relationship, and for unearthing stories untold.

Whether in prisons, schools, communities, or social movements, each critical PAR project opens with a “research camp” where those who most intimately carry the stories of injustice in their souls engage in critical dialogue with community based

practitioners, researchers, activists, youth, educators.... We share our provisional and partial knowledges, interrogate our differences, return awkwardly and deliberately to the fault lines of power within the group, dive into privilege and what Anzaldúa would call “choques” – difficult discussions (Torre & Ayala, 2009). In those conversations we deconstruct and sharpen our key constructs and catalogue the specificity of context; we interrogate the dominant story being circulated, unravel the discursive framing of the problem, dig into the structures and ideologies of privilege that sustain inequities, and 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, we work to democratize the right to research (Appadurai, 2006) and by so doing we strengthen the construct, context, and impact validity of our projects (Fine, 1994; 2006).

We call this practice critical Participatory Action Research (PAR). Critical PAR recognizes that expertise is widely distributed but legitimacy is not; that those who have tasted injustice have a particularly acute understanding of the affects, capillaries, consequences, and circuits of dispossession and privilege, like Rosie from the bedroom and Du Bois from behind the veil. Critical PAR projects seek to understand the degree to which the collateral damage of oppression coagulates in – but does not originate from – low-income communities of color. We draw on critical race, feminist, postcolonial, and neo-Marxist theory to bring a critical theoretical and empirical eye to the structural and historic roots of inequities. A design for knowledge production, critical PAR is **not** a methodology: we conduct large scale surveys, ethnography, focus groups, interviews, spoken word, visual methods, mapping. What is distinct, and perhaps to some most jarring about PAR, is that it privileges the line of vision marinated at the bottom of social hierarchies, not exclusively but fundamentally. Those who have been marginalized are central to framing the “problem,” shaping research questions, defining the methods, crafting the instruments, determining samples, analyzing the material, designing products to be of use and, in the end, they “own” the data.

This chapter sketches how we take up scholarship through a lens of *critical bifocality* (Weis & Fine, 2012), a conceptual grandchild to Du Bois’ *veil* in which we: (1) interrogate critically the empirical claims of dominant stories; (2) document the vast, contradictory, and pulsing landscape of counter-narratives, (3) reveal the predatory relation between the two, and (4) generate reparative accounts of the betrayals, wisdom, and desires of those who have paid the most intimate price for sustained injustice. Through examples, I will try to consider how critical participatory groundings alter the praxis of research, strengthen the theoretical project, and deepen our complex responsibility to and across place.

### **Participation Widens the Gaze when the Object of Inquiry becomes the Architect of Research**

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half- hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored

man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 1-2)

Many of our projects are rooted in deep collaboration with community members who have been defined as ‘the problem’ – either the cause of or the site in which social problems become legible. People who live in high crime neighborhoods, or those who have been incarcerated, queer youth tangled with the juvenile justice system, and school push outs, have been (mis)represented as the source, rather than a consequence, of structural inequalities.

Critical PAR inverts the gaze. The traditional “object” of research – the young person assaulted by aggressive policing, the woman serving time in a maximum security prison, the gender non-conforming young person pushed out of home and public high school – sits on the research team, reading theory across generations, debating frames, designing research, analyzing data, and curating products of meaning and use to policy, organizing, community life, and social theory. When flattened objects of scrutiny become subjects, theorists, researchers and analysts, the research project makes visible how unevenly history and structures distribute resources, opportunities, and dignity; reveals how communities of privilege benefit from and reproduce unjust arrangements, and when research teams read together the “classics” on social problems, together we grow uncomfortably aware of how social inquiry has historically naturalized unjust social relations. We consider now how the production of knowledge is transformed when those who have been objectified by scholarship shape the inquiry.

In the later half of the 1990s, at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (BHCF), a maximum-security prison for women, a team of seven researchers from the Graduate Center collaborated with a team of seven researchers in prison to document the impact of college in prison on the women, their children, the prison environment, and post-release outcomes. It was 1995; President Clinton has just signed into law a provision that prisoners could not secure Pell grants to pay college tuition. Within six months of passage, the 350 college-in-prison programs nationwide shrunk to eight. At BHCF, within six months due to the dedication of the women in prison, college was resurrected. Two months after that, the women decided we needed to document empirically the impact on the women, the prison, their children, recidivism rates, and tax savings. And so we built a participatory research team of seven women in prison and seven from the Graduate Center. We met every other week, in the prison, for almost four years. In the beginning, in our extended “research camp” we spent months sharing perspectives on prison, college, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, mothering, politics, Whiteness, punishment, and transformation. We read on methodology, feminist theory, critical justice studies, and critical race. Together we generated a complex design for interviewing women in prison, in college and not; their children; correction officers; university faculty who teach in the program, and 20 women who completed college while in prison who were subsequently released (Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, “Missy,” Rivera, Roberts, Smart, Torre, Upegui [www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/changing\\_minds.pdf](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/changing_minds.pdf))

A wide ribbon of differences characterized our research team. The 14 woman

research team included, of course, those of us who were prisoners and those who were free, but we were also mothers and not mothers; women who had suffered serious illness and those of us who had been spared thus far; some had experienced family violence as children, and some who only witnessed or heard about it; women who engaged in activist community politics as adults and those who stayed away; women who grew up speaking Spanish and those of us who spoke primarily English; some Black, Latina, Caribbean, White; a few lesbian, a few straight and lots between.

Across four years of working together, these fleeting threads of identity and experience gracefully tangled up in conversations about our lives, college, prison, politics, and research. Beautiful and spontaneous alliances were stitched among our 14, dulling but never erasing the depressing green uniforms that severely differentiated us as free and not free. Those from the Graduate Center and those from Bedford Hills were always aware that half of us could leave at 11 to weep on the train and others would be strip searched before returning to their cells.

Our task was to document the impact of college within the prison, but the women imprisoned at BHCF understood the far reaches of college in prison on children, on women post-release, on the correctional officers, college campus faculty, and administrators and even on the students at the participating colleges. They explained to us how college permeated relationships of women on the “yard” where Alice Walker and Michael Foucault reading groups met; how college reduced disciplinary incidents and changed the climate of the Children’s Center, the “anger management” classes, the Summer camp for the children of the women and evening discussions across cells. We tracked of course the predictable outcomes - recidivism and cost benefit analyses - but much more fundamentally the women insisted that we build an archive of the personal, intellectual, relational, and political transformations of and by the women, their writings and letters and poetry, relations with their children, nieces and nephews, their desire to give back to society, take up leadership within the prison, engage in justice movements upon release, and their delight at paying taxes.

With a widened “we,” the research spread like a wide-angle lens to capture all the ways “college” touched lives, families, communities and movements. College unleashed waves of possibility that rushed through the prison, what the Superintendent called a “participatory paramilitary institution,” and influenced those beyond the barbed wire. As a dynamic institutional transformation, no longer simply a noun, college transformed aspects of life within and beyond Bedford, reaching even students at the colleges that participated in the College Consortium, including Sara Lawrence, Marymount, and Bank Street.

In a meeting in Albany, sometime in 1999, the Graduate Center researchers met with members of the Black and Latino caucus of the NYS legislation and were told that, to bolster support for college in prison, we would have to demonstrate a drop in recidivism and cost savings. And so we requested the New York State Department of Corrections conduct a recidivism study comparing women in prison who participated in college, and those who didn’t, controlling for incoming crime and level of education, and we learned college reduced recidivism from 29% over three years to 7.7%. We invited an economist colleague to conduct a quick cost benefit analysis per 100 women participating in college. But far more than that, our participatory evaluation documented how college pierced the membranes of prison life, enabling faculty, volunteers, artists,

writers, actors, church members into the facility, and welding circuits of possibility emanating out, carried in the books on tape that mothers created for their toddlers, the fund raisers that generated scholarships for the child of a victim, the child of a woman in prison, the child of a correction officer, the poetry by women of BHCF sent to the new “admits” at Sara Lawrence, and the sense of responsibility and commitment to family, community and social movements embodied by the women upon release. More than 20 years later, *Changing Minds* is still downloaded by legislators - even Republicans - who seek alternatives as they recognize that so much money, and so many bodies, have been claimed by the prison industrial complex.

Throughout these projects, there were of course lots of mistakes, moments of power negotiations, missteps and awkward “hiccups” which we have written about (Fine et al., 2003). Sitting on the other side of the veil, most of us were naïve – ignorant really – about the workings of the prison industrial complex. Especially those of us who were White. Frankly, we were stunned to bear witness to systems that seemed to protect us being so brutal to communities of color.

Over the past 20 years, various groupings of us have co-authored white papers, professional presentations, performances, community brochures, and participated in high profile media coverage. Twenty years later, many of the women from Bedford who have since been released have become key national criminal justice policy experts: at once deeply rooted in community and impressively engaged with high-level policy negotiations. Nevertheless, critical participation radically transformed the intellectual, affective, and political dynamics of policy research. Deep participation made visible the racialized, classed, and gendered dynamics and consequences of policing and incarceration.

### **Participation Refuses Downstream Analyses of Upstream Troubles**

Over the past 30 years, I have been invited to testify in court as an expert witness in dozens of educational injustice lawsuits on gender/race discrimination, finance inequity, disparate impact of testing policies, zero tolerance, and educational inadequacy in communities of poverty. Typically I am asked to be an “expert” when girls, children of color, or low-income children are suing as a class. I have testified in the Citadel case in South Carolina and Central high in Philadelphia – both cases where young women litigating denied access to all male public institutions; in Wedowee, Alabama where a principal canceled a prom because of mixed race dating and called a biracial woman a “problem” that shouldn’t be replicated; in *Williams v. California*, a class action case brought by low-income students of color, immigrants, attending schools that are profoundly inadequate; in *Reed v. California*, documenting the impact of attending schools with 40 – 60% long term subs has on students’ academic opportunities.

The courtroom is a wrestling match for dueling research narratives, on a floor that is profoundly uneven. The dominant story enjoys well-funded lawyers, can mobilize lots of evidence and can relax on a bed of common sense embodied by and probably comforting to judge and jury. The counter narrative has to chip away gently at the dominant story with legal logic, empirically demonstrate harm, need and capacity, and must promise that the prescribed remedy will miraculously resolve the scalding, historic and deep scars of injustice.

Educational inequities constitute what planning designers Horst Rittel and Melvin Weber (1973) call “wicked problems” – entangled, crusty, reproductive, with many origins and mutations; but courts want what these same authors call a “soluble remedies.”

In 2014, Cory Greene, Sonia Sanchez, and I conducted preliminary research for a class action lawsuit contending poor children deserve more, and enjoy less “instructional time” because of violence, lock downs, interruptions, 40% long-term subs, immigration raids, over-reliance on testing.... John Rogers and Nicole Mirra (2014) had just begun a comprehensive analysis of disparities in instructional time in schools throughout California and have since concluded that students who attend extremely poor high schools lose, on average, 25 days a year – almost 14% of the year – to in-school disruptions, which is more than their wealthier peers.

We were hired to conduct a qualitative assessment of systematic disruptions of instructional time, as experienced by students and teachers in low-income schools. We facilitated five focus groups of teens, and four focus groups of educators, asking them to complete a survey, draw maps of how time feels in their bodies in schools, and participate in a group discussion. Students drew maps with hands flying high in advanced classes separated by perforated lines from heads on desks behind prison bars in remedial classes. Young people sketched snails and clocks whose hands have stopped, long-term substitute teachers showing the films NEMO and JUICE to high schools students in disinvested schools. In our first focus group, Carlos drew a picture of himself and his classmates walking along “the yellow brick road; we take tests, some of us do well and keep going, we have no idea where, and some fall off the road. But there are these flying monkeys that keep getting in the way.” The other students followed up:

“Yeah I get what you mean about flying monkeys” – Alicia interjected, “My brothers are both in prison but they call me every morning to make sure I am ready to go to school, they worry about me so much.” Jeanne chimed in:

Not to be, like you know, pity or anything, I just lost my little brother this summer, so um, and that was something that was really hard for my family to deal with. He was loved by a lot of people. He was only like twelve, and um...it, it, it all has to do with what you’re anchored in. So I just wasn’t sure if I should travel to Princeton this summer.

A few moments later, Marcello interjected, “My dad was deported last year and my life has been pretty rough since then.”

Economic, familial, political, embodied and academic precarity saturated these young lives. Young people who were most vulnerable to the material dislocations of family, home, school, language, nation, and relationships were also hyper-vulnerable to neoliberal educational reforms in which teachers had been removed or transferred, schools closed, long term subs are common place. Despite all that has been written on the fundamental importance of trust, stability, continuity, and sustainability of relationships in school, particularly for the most marginalized students,



urban educational reform has been characterized by disruptions for the poor and continuity for the rich. It was astonishing to listen as these young people narrated with eloquence the predictability of the unpredictable, but not with a sense of despair or hopelessness.

At the end of the focus groups we asked “Tell us about a time when time flew in school; when you lost track of time; when you were learning so much that you forgot about every thing else.” Monique piped up, “There was a teacher who said ‘You are gonna be a great reader, I am going to help you’ – and she handed me a book that I couldn’t read and she said, ‘We are going to do this together.’” Vicente said, “I just love teachers who put red marks all over my paper but then show me how to write better.” Students who were engaged in workshops on multicultural leadership, YPAR projects and youth activism seminars at Berkeley and UCLA spoke with a vibrancy about learning “our history – with all due respect, we are tired of learning Caucasian history”; producing critical knowledge, pursuing research, writing poetry, leading campaigns. The distinction between their in-school experiences and their experiences in these critical youth organizing/leadership contexts was striking. But in our last focus group, in a community setting where there was more despair than oxygen, I explained the purpose of the focus groups and how the lawsuit framed more instructional time as a civil right long denied. Afterward, one young man said, “Lady you seen really nice. Please don’t make us go to school for longer days. It already feels like a jail.”

The young people successfully flipped the gaze from a narrow question of disparities to a larger morass of cumulative, cross-sector structural betrayal. Listening closely we learned three things: (1) beware seductive appeal of technical solutions to wicked problems in policy or in court. Disparities are oppressive, but more time in toxic settings is not a civil rights agenda. (2) it is a cruel policy irony that the young people with the most personal, material and existential precarity attend schools that are most structurally unstable. And (3) even in circumstances of massive disinvestment and civic betrayal, young people in highly precarious circumstances nevertheless yearn for opportunities to be respected, recognized, and educated, to dive into critical histories, create opportunities for and with their communities, and to mobilize for educational justice. Despairing about their schools, these young people nevertheless had a thirst to be educated.

By listening to the voices of young people speaking across very different educational settings, we learned just how much context matters. Demographically identical youth were so passionately engaged in settings that invited inquiry, critical history, creativity, and deep participation, and so fundamentally alienated in settings corroded by neoliberal reforms. More instructional time is of course a human right, particularly for young people routinely denied equal time in school. And yet more time in systematically disinvested and dehumanizing buildings is no one’s idea of justice.

Ultimately, we chose not to testify. We met with the lawyers and explained we could not testify for the civil right to more instructional time in schools that violate the dignity of the young. We continue to work with lawyers, youth, and community activists, advocating for more time in worthy educational settings.

### **Participation Incites the Contestation of False Binaries**

I turn now to a project where wide-berth participation provoked a searing contestation of the categories and binaries of gender and sexuality that have been so naturalized in social inquiry. In the hands of the LGBTQ youth researchers who were designing the national participatory survey for *What's Your Issue?*, categories and binaries were gracefully pulverized.

María Torre, Director of the Public Science Project, and I were approached by a group of funders whose grant giving focused on the needs of LGBTQ youth of color. They were disturbed that the bulk of the LGBTQ youth research focuses on depression, bullying, suicide, and gay marriage. These funders knew other stories: that gender nonconforming and queer youth were disproportionately homeless, in foster care, and involved with juvenile justice, that many young people find the binaries of gay/lesbian and straight, as well as male and female to be psychically violent straight jackets. They knew the very identity politics that had ushered victories in the courts and at the ballot box also erased the “inconvenient truths” about fluidity, flexibility, and contingency of young sexual bodies. With very important exceptions, the field needed more intersectional research on the landscape of structural violence against LGBTQ youth of color (among the significant exceptions see the work of Diamond, 2009; Greene, 2008; Irvine, 2010; Kull, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2015; Russell, Toomey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2014; Tate, 2016). These funders sought a participatory project that could solicit narratives and survey responses from a much wider berth of young people living on the edge, who would tell a different story about the desires, betrayals, dreams, demands and radical imaginaries of LGBTQ youth of color.

A very diverse research coalition designed *What's Your Issue?* as a national participatory research project created by youth and adults to document the wide range of experiences, dreams, and desires of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and gender nonconforming youth (LGBTQ & GNC), over-representing by design LGBTQ and GNC youth of color. To begin, we built a national advisory board: half youth/half adults, most working at the intersections of racial/sexual justice, immigration and sexuality, disability and sexuality, from rural and urban, high schools and juvenile centers, foster care and Gay/Straight Alliances, including artists, activists, educators, researchers, and young people. We gathered small groups of young activists to draft survey questions that would integrate existing standardized instruments with “home grown” items that would tap issues of meaning, urgency, debate, and controversy to the young people. We piloted these items with satellite groups around the country, linked to community-based organizations in Austin, Tucson, Los Angeles... and then we field-tested our “bad draft.”

In August of the first Summer of WYI, more than 150 young people streamed into a Korean deli in midtown Manhattan, at Lexington and 48<sup>th</sup>, climbing the steps to the second floor where the air was an acrid blend of air freshener, mildew, and perhaps a slight smell of chlorine/urine. We ate, laughed, traded pronouns/pseudonyms and real names, created and presented colorful banners for “what the world should know about LGBTQ youth.” They split off into groups, for hours, to critique, edit, revise, and re-mix the “bad draft” of survey. Across rooms, groups, and arguments we critiqued, re-wrote and reassembled what would eventually become a national, online survey filled with standardized but many more home grown questions about activisms and dreams, betrayals and worries, intersections and anxieties, gifts and dreams. The survey can be found at [www.whatsyourissue.com](http://www.whatsyourissue.com).

I met in a small room with 20 young people from various agencies, activist organizations and educational spaces—The Door, Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Harvey Milk School, Brooklyn College, Urban Academy, and elsewhere. Diverse by any measure, we self-selected to discuss some of the more “contentious issues” that might fall into the bucket of epistemological violence: questions on pain, betrayal, needs, questions that could be misheard as pathologizing or damage oriented. Long difficult conversations ensued, without consensus, about what to include, how to phrase questions, what to ask and what not to ask. A few ethnographic excerpts reveal the conceptual thickening of constructs developed in dialogue.

### **How Do Injustice and Care Move Under the Skin?**

“This survey is going out all over the country, and to Puerto Rico. One of the things we want to know is how young people experience injustice, how often and how they cope.” I offered that we wanted to build on the research of Bruce McEwen who has documented how the neuroscience of injustice “gets under the skin” and makes us sick. So, I added, “We are going to list a bunch of experiences in a column, that might be considered unfair or unjust, and respondents will rate how stressful they find these experiences. What kinds of things should we list?” Hands went up:

- \*No place to live
- \*My family threw me out
- \* Finding out you are HIV positive and having your family tell you to leave
- \* Not being able to afford transportation to get to work
- \* When I just tap my girlfriend’s nose in the hallway in school, or give her a quick kiss on the cheek, some security guard screams ‘TOO MUCH PDA’ (public displays of affection ) when the straight kids are basically having sex on the other side of the hall – and my mother gets a call!
- \* Getting beat up in school, called a faggot and I get suspended or transferred ‘cause they say they can’t promise to keep me safe
- \* There’s some kids called “foster by gay” ‘cause their families say they are causing too much trouble, especially if the family is undocumented
- \* When I walk down the street holding hands with my girlfriend and police yell out “I want to fuck both of you”—and young people around the room begin to snap in agreement

And then Jay, whose preferred personal pronoun was THEY, raised an arm, from under a baseball cap, sitting top a full Afro, soft brown skin, welcoming smile, grey eyes, spoke, “Every time the police stop and frisk me, you know in parks or at the piers or even in my neighborhood, when they feel my breasts they get angry and violent. Can we put that on the survey?”

This resulting list of stressors is long, complex, and rooted in painful interactions with intimates and strangers; cumulative cross-sector troubles; raw betrayals by teachers, police, and families – the very adults who are supposed to protect.

When I asked, “What special gifts do you have that the world doesn’t know about you?”  
“We know how to take care of ourselves.”  
“And each other”  
“I’ve been doing it since I was 12”  
“7”  
“14”

The gift of self care, and generous non-judgmental care for others, is also assessed on the survey, as a well developed community resource.

### **A Few Minutes Later...**

“We don’t want to create a ‘damage’ focused survey – there has been so much of that - so maybe we shouldn’t ask about suicide?” I naively said to a small group tucked away in a corner next to the bathroom we colonized as Gender Neutral. Jasmine looked shocked and concerned: “You have to ask about suicide; we all think about it. You need to ask ‘Do you think about it every day, week, month, once a year? Have you tried? Do you talk to friends about it? If you tried, how did you do it? Have you stopped a friend from suicide? Have you lost friends to suicide?’” This was clearly a profound and layered field of inquiry, not a single point on an epidemiological metric – to not ask would be to betray biographies of oppression, and to ask could generate data that could be exploited.

### **Destabilizing Categories**

Discussions about gender, and sex, generated passionate debate and a few sparks. Drawing on the work of Angela Irvine (2010), Steph Anderson (2016), Jenn Chmielewski, Kim Belmonte and Brett Stoudt (2015), we became interested in unraveling how much discrimination and minority stress, microaggressions and violence were associated with the intersections of race and gender nonconformity, as well as sexual orientation. And so we decided, like other researchers interested in this relatively new line of inquiry, to add gender (non)conformity items to the survey, asking respondents to rate themselves from 1–5 Not at All to Very Feminine and then 1–5 Not at All to Very Masculine. In addition, to trace the social, psychological and political experience for transyouth, we added an item asking what sex were you assigned at birth, and what’s your preferred gender pronoun now? We asked young people for reactions to the inclusion of these items.

Queenie, a transwoman jumped in to say she felt affirmed by the femininity/masculinity scales while Ray, who identified as gender queer, challenged her asking why we would rely upon masculine and feminine ideas when we were challenging them? Roe, a 19 year old transman yelled that asking about sex assigned at birth, “is a form of psychic violence.” “If you have *man* and *transman* as separate categories, does that mean a transman is not really a man?” Someone else offered, from the other side of the deli, “If I identify female, even though I was labeled male as birth, and I act female, am I gender conforming or nonconforming?”

Our resolutions of these choques satisfy few, but offend fewer: We have revised the language of the question with a rather lengthy explanation.

Needless to say, this may be a thrilling moment for queer theory, but an empirically awkward moment for survey construction (see Charlotte Tate's writings for cutting edge theory-method, e.g. Tate & Pearson, 2016, as well as Ritch Savin-Williams, 2005). The creation and deconstruction of categories have serious political, personal, theoretical and legal consequence; destabilizing categories upon which identities, bodies, relationships and politics have found some comfort, political power, sanctuary is a fraught process.

Critical PAR projects enter the difficult terrain of these debates, although we don't necessarily resolve or avoid the epistemological problems of Othering. Even when the very people who have been the "objects" of inquiry are among the researchers who create the survey/interview instrument, we run into enormous heterogeneity, intersectionality, dissent, conflicts, bruises, paper cuts, and erasures within. These discussions can be painful – when young people find a space they have longed for, one that appears, on the surface to be affirming, but then they inevitably bump into comments that bruise, sting, trigger.... ([www.whatsyourissue.com](http://www.whatsyourissue.com)) -- but are crucial for reasons ethical, theoretical, epistemological, and political.

As the survey meanders across the country, in January we are bringing activist teams from communities around the country (California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Texas, Mississippi and NY/NJ) for a critical PAR institute, to analyze the emergent data; when they return home they will collect a portfolio of life-stories with elders so that we can host a gallery of lives on the Public Science Project website, acknowledging the sturdy and worn shoulders we all stand on. The young people will return to NYC the evening before the PRIDE march to perform and present their materials and we will gather more material on the politics and embodiments, solidarities and willful subjectivities of LGBTQ youth. At the end of the project we will produce a multi-generational white paper on policy issues; youth graphic design/social media on the findings; policy briefs and performances of lives at the radical edge.

It is far too early to say anything responsibly. And yet even at this point we know a few things, simply because we crafted the survey in deep conversation, contestation, and collaboration with a wide range of queer youth and adult activists, scholars and artists. We know, now, the dominant story about bullying, depression, suicide, HIV and gay marriage is both true and profoundly hollow; a story that smothers the radical desires and demands, the deep sense of entitlement and solidarities, the complex identities and intersectionalities young people embody and enact. We know further that structural and personal intersectionality, fluidity and contingency matter enormously, especially for those most marginalized by race, sexuality, class, and immigration hierarchies. Heteronormativity bleeds across systems rendering young people vulnerable to structural violence. Youth become "foster by gay" in Arizona because their undocumented families, under State surveillance, fear the attention their gender brings into the home; Black LGBTQ youth who attend under-resourced schools are over-policed and are far more likely to be suspended than their White or straight peers; deaf lesbians are often denied the sexual and reproductive health care they deserve; transyouth are still struggling for bathrooms in high schools that insist on gender designations; lesbian girls holding hands

on the street report that police sexually harass them with “I want to fuck both of you...” and other youth in the room snap in agreement.

While we are learning much about the sedimentary rock of intersectional oppressions, we are also learning much about the rich possibilities of what Clara Mayo called “positive marginality” (1982, 57) or what Sara Ahmed (2014, p 1) calls “willful subjects”. While the dominant psychological story, rooted in Goffman’s (1963) thinking about stigma, argues that oppression and marginalization provoke shame and internalization, evidence from protest movements around the country suggests that LGBTQ youth of color are often at the forefront of youth activism for educational justice, Black Lives Matter, OCCUPY, police violence, DREAMERS, prison abolition, Fight for \$15, environmental justice.... Goffman was onto something about how those he called “normals” view those with “stigmata,” but not about how people make sense under the veil. Du Bois would remind us that double consciousness flourishes, and Gloria Anzaldúa would tell us that born in the soil of structural violence, “wild tongues can not be tamed, they can only be cut out.” (1987, 76) Classic theories about stigma, internalization, and silencing need dramatic renovation so that we may begin to understand the rich roots of radical marginality such that highly marginalized young people cultivate rich vision, strong sense of entitlement and a desire for justice – not a seat at the existing table but a radically renovated space for divergent inclusion.

### **Bearing Wit(h)ness/Refusing Epistemological Violence**

*“Epistemological violence is a practice that is executed ... when interpretations construct the ‘Other’ as problematic or inferior.” (Teo, 2008,47, )*

Thomas Teo (2008) cautions the epistemological violence of misrepresentation committed routinely in social inquiry designed on/for/about *Others*. Critical participation enters, deliberately, this ethical landmine with delicacy and intentionality. Critical PAR seeks to democratize the right to research; widen the grounds of expertise; refuse downstream designs; challenge naturalized binaries and, as Nell Painter writes in *Soul Murder and Slavery*, critical PAR bends toward a “fully loaded accounting” (p. ) of circuits of oppression and possibility. Critical PAR commits to a social inquiry influenced by and aligned with those who have paid the most intimate price for structural injustice; nourished by a wide range of often contradictory voices under the sheets and behind the veil, evading flying monkeys on the Yellow Brick Road, behind bars and emanating from bodies that righteously refuse the confines of narrow identity categories.

In critical PAR, those of us with relative privilege, who are lucky enough to dwell in the contact zone, learn – through the generosity of friends and colleagues - to hold our tongues still, and hold ourselves accountable to voices of pain, laughter, desire, and solidarity trembling under the surface of the dominant story.

We learn that college in prison is so much more than an intervention of higher education; the human right to more instructional time in abusive schools is a violation of dignity and hope; the political crowding of diverse bodies into male/female, or gay/straight binaries requires a surgery of the soul. Instead, college in prison is an opportunity for a kid from Bed Sty to tell his friend, “My mom is upstate at college” and for a woman to rewrite her life. Young people who attend “drop out factories” with more

tests and police than engaging educators despair about school but are ever-hungry for a critical education. LGBTQ youth from low-income communities often carry keloids of oppression under the skin but bubble with fountains of creativity, collective entitlement, and a righteous commitment to justice; their willful subjectivities are generous, caring, critical, and filled with radical imagination for what might be.

Deep participation signals an epistemological commitment to deflate privileged constructions of knowledge, expertise and objectivity; the theoretical courage to enter into inquiry with the ghostly subaltern voices that denaturalize the world as told in dominant stories. Deep participation up ends science as we have practiced it, legitimates stories heretofore untold and may even generate research that lives up to Marge Piercy's 1982 calling "To Be of Use".

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first...  
I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident....  
The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.

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