

FORTY-SEVENTH  
DOCTORAL COMMENCEMENT  
ADDRESS

MICHELLE FINE

Distinguished Professor of Psychology,  
Urban Education, Liberal Studies, and Women's Studies,  
CUNY Graduate Center



THE GRADUATE CENTER  
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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AVERY FISHER HALL AT LINCOLN CENTER  
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**G**ood morning President Kelly, honorees Ina Caro, Robert Caro, and John Streicker, President Emerita Frances Degen Horowitz, Trustee Berry, Vice Chancellor Dobrin, honored guests on the platform from the Graduate Center Foundation Board, members of the Graduate Center cabinet, faculty, and, most important, the graduating class of 2011, family, and friends . . .

CONFESSION: I am not Tony Kushner.

This week, like all weeks, we have had our share of political and environmental disasters but also great moments of hope. First, there was no rapture; it would have been a great, if tragic, irony after all those years of writing your dissertation. . . . The U.S. Supreme Court ordered the State of California to reduce its inmate population by 32,000 to “correct longstanding violations of inmates’ rights.” The New Jersey Supreme Court has instructed Governor Chris Christie to provide equitable school funding for the most resource-deprived districts in the state. Dane County Circuit Judge Maryann Sumi placed a restraining order on Wisconsin’s recent collective bargaining law. In a few days Tony Kushner will be getting his much deserved honorary degree, and last evening was a stunning memorial to the great public intellectual Manning Marable.

Today, 334 of you will graduate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, representing forty-one countries including China, Romania, Burma, Congo, and Colombia, and also the Bronx, Florida, Puerto Rico, Illinois, and of course Staten Island. As I understand it, from reviewing the transcripts of the graduating class, most of you were raised in homes that did not originally speak Foucault. Some of you have earned a Ph.D. after ten, twelve, seventeen years.

A double Mazel Tov to you for persistence.

Before you are hooded, I have one more assignment for you. Consider it a lifetime comprehensive exam. As you know, we are in a political, fiscal, ideological, and intellectual custody battle for the soul of the public. You—the brilliant, diverse, and deserving graduates of *a*, perhaps

*the*, thriving, democratic, critical public institution for doctoral education—know intimately the joys of a stunning public higher education. Thus in gratitude to the taxpayers of New York and with love for the children of generations to come, I ask you today to consider *how*, not *if*, you will engage in the struggle to defend and reclaim public education, as vital to our collective lives in a multiracial democracy.

One might ask, when did *public* become a four-letter word? In the spring of 2011, we have witnessed a dramatic fiscal and ideological makeover of the public sphere, a grotesque shredding of budgets for public education and social services while millionaires and corporations enjoy tax breaks. Across the country, public officials have chosen to transfer the economic pain onto the already burdened poor and working class, in drag as austerity, as if the economic crisis were natural and inevitable; as if we were truly engaged in shared sacrifice. On every measure of social life, inequality gaps are swelling. British epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (*The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, Bloomsbury Press, 2009) document how these gaps jeopardize our collective human security in terms of health, infant mortality, crime, fear, violence, civic participation, voting, and sense of shared fates. Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich keeps reminding us that the wealthiest 1 percent own at least 25 percent of privately held wealth (, 2001), while law professor and scholar Michelle Alexander, in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2010) tells us that there are more black men in prison today than were enslaved in 1850, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* continues to report that financial assistance to higher education is in jeopardy for low-income youth and shamefully unavailable to students who are considered undocumented. On the front of educational policy for democracy, we have indeed lost our way. Fear not, for the drumbeats of organizing for educational justice can be heard across the country. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

At the dawn of the 1900s, W. E. B. DuBois published *The Crisis*, a magazine committed to chronicling the ongoing exploitation of the African American community. Brilliant man, he understood that our country would not likely attend or respond to the cumulative structural neglect and miseducation of black children until a profit could be made or until the people would revolt (see *The Souls of Black Folk*, A.C. McClurg

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& Co.; University Press John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, MA, 1903; Bartleby.com, 1999). One hundred years later, the perverse braiding of poor people's pain with corporate profit is now becoming an American tradition, evident in predatory lending, housing foreclosures, the proliferation of for-profit charters, and the money being made from the prison industrial complex.

As my ninety-six-year-old mother would say, from DuBois's mouth to your ears, now we hear there's a crisis! The media circulates caricatures of K–12 educators, especially those with tenure and experience, by distributing popular images of rubber rooms, incompetence, greed, and educators with criminal records. Some conservative media tried—unsuccessfully—to unsettle the reputation of our own brilliant Frances Fox Piven and other critical scholars of participatory democracy and labor studies. Periodic twitters bemoan fat pensions and the “tragedy” of public universities. These media stories occlude the sustained conditions of poverty and discrimination, highlight public sector “failure,” selectively report “data” on privatized success, and serve as ideological lubricant for aggressive budget cuts, policies of privatization, and relentless power (and land) grabs.

Enter a new regime of power brokers—thank you Robert Caro—subsidizing this reconfigured “common sense.” As the logic goes, the public sector is inefficient, corrupt, greedy, and in need of radical reform, takeover, and salvation. Leeching onto the pain of cumulative structural disinvestment in poor communities, this message resonates for some with justified outrage over generations of miseducation in low-income communities. But while corporations and market logic promise to save poor people from the inefficiency of the public, crucial political questions of participatory democracy, racial and ethnic justice, schools and universities as a resource in community life, the autonomy of knowledge, questions of community/youth/educator power, and accountability (to whom?) gently slip off the policy table and media headlines, into a neoliberal wastebasket.

But this was Spring 2011—your Spring, Arab Spring. We have witnessed a virtual human chain of educational struggles unleashed across the United States, stretching from the University of Puerto Rico and Madison, Wisconsin, to Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan, where 5,466 teachers—all of them—were given pink slips. Students,

staff, and faculty are organizing against the privatization of the University of California system, and of course at the City University of New York, students, staff, and faculty, with scholars, artists, and activists around the globe, organized a stunning and victorious campaign insisting that our Board of Trustees respect intellectual integrity and faculty governance and shaming their moments of silence.

These eruptive moments for educational justice have provoked funny little opportunities for new allies. In my brief remaining time, let me offer a quick story of surprising solidarity. When busloads of Professional Staff Congress (PSC) members traveled to Albany on March 23, 2011, to protest the budget cuts to CUNY, a small group of faculty, students, and Higher Education Officers (HEOs) agreed to engage in civil disobedience and be arrested, to demonstrate the breadth and depth of this fiscal injustice. As the state troopers gently placed handcuffs on the aging PSC 33, a few whispered, “Thanks for doing this for public workers. You know, we can’t.” In Albany as in Madison we witness the emergence of a stunning, tentative, but swelling alliance among college students and educators and police officers, firefighters, housing activists, K–12 educators, social service advocates, public health workers, and other public employees. Indeed, Chuck Canterbury, National President of the Fraternal Order of Police, not someone I quote often, spoke for his colleagues in Madison, asking, “Who are these evil teachers who teach your children, these evil policemen who protect them, these evil firemen who pull them from burning buildings? When did we all become evil?”

So you may decide to take up your third comprehensive exam in critical scholarship and/or activism in these struggles against the gentrification of public education. But before I end, I’d like to complicate this work a bit. Let’s be honest. We don’t want to fight to keep lousy institutions open just because they are public. Engaged struggles for public financial support and democratic governance are necessary but not sufficient. Our vision must be bolder. We need your wisdom, scholarship, and *chutzpa* to reclaim and restore the wide-open intellectual culture, participatory passions, and radical imagination of public institutions, to protect their vibrancy and to build a deep recognition of our profound interdependence. (I see some of you confused by the word *chutzpa*—if you don’t know what *chutzpa* is, you can’t really say you have a Ph.D. from CUNY! Ask a friend!)

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Let me borrow an image from biology writer Janine M. Beynus (*Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature*, HarperCollins, 1997) who has lectured around the globe on mighty oak trees that survive natural disaster. Beynus pulls social problems up by their roots and asks, “How would nature solve this?” (Stephen A. Goldsmith and Elizabeth Lynne, *What We See: Advancing the Observations of Jane Jacobs*, New Village Press, 2010). Standing tall, almost unbowed, she tells us, oak trees grow in communities, expansive, bold, and comfortably taking up lots of space. While they appear autonomous and freestanding, the truth is that they are held up by a thick, entwined maze of roots, deep and wide. These intimate underground snuggles lean on each other for strength, even and especially in times of natural disaster.

Because you have had the privilege of being educated at the Graduate Center and have probably taught throughout the CUNY system, networked by subways and email systems equally likely to fail at just the wrong moment, you know the thrill and terror of shared fates, the sweet comfort and knotty entanglements of entwined roots, and you know in your belly the intimate pain of inequality gaps sketched into the faces of your students. You know that we are weakened by segregated neighborhoods and schools, with some of us locked in gated communities, others behind bars, and increasing numbers deported. And you know how jazzed we can get in our wildly diverse CUNY classrooms as students or faculty, when we meet strangers in pulsating public spaces like parks, libraries, basketball courts, and subways; as we listen to National Public Radio, bike in Prospect and Central Parks, visit the Bronx Zoo and Botanical Gardens; as we breathe in the luscious sounds and visions of museums and public concerts.

These spaces constitute productive sites of public possibility, provoking what John Dewey, in his “Aesthetic Experience as a Primary Phase and as an Artistic Development” (*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 9 (1), 1950, 56–58), called “aesthetic” experiences, which inspire sensual imagination for what might be, which he contrasted with “anesthetic” experiences that deaden “heart, mind, and soul.”

Public education may be a deeply flawed highly uneven system, a work in progress. It is, however, our only chance for participatory collective sustainability. And so it is our work to deepen the roots and resurrect the aesthetic, provocative possibilities of public life, even, and especially, in hard times.

So, our collective project is nothing short of resuscitating diverse, critical, democratic spaces of serious scholarship for social transformation. Toward that end I want to honor our Angels of America working at the Graduate Center including the security officers working under Sergeant Cheryl Holder and with Stan Miller and the administrators, HEOs, the PSC, and the adjuncts who stitch together the CUNY community so we don't really know how precarious it all is. I know that naming names is dangerous business, but I want us to give a shout out to three unsung heroes at the Graduate Center, who care intimately and always for your three basic needs—your *heart*, Vice President for Student Affairs Matt Schoengood; your *wallet* and *fellowships*, Associate Director of Graduate Assistant Programs Anne Ellis; and your *IRB application*, the irreplaceable IRB administrator Kay Powell. Matt, Anne, and Kay are just a few of the administrators who ride the elevator thinking about how to resolve your crises; wholly attentive to students' financial, academic, and human needs, they can be found emailing quietly into the night.

And finally to our much beloved groundskeeper, President Bill Kelly, who has sculpted the Graduate Center as a spa for intellectual engagement, critique, dialogue, and labor. Over half a decade, Bill has not only protected our fiscal health and overseen our magnificent growth, but he has also nurtured the intellect, heart, ethics, and deeply rooted public vision of the Graduate Center. Nationally and globally the Graduate Center is now one of the most highly desirable salons for public intellectuals committed to scholarship for social transformation and rekindling the public imagination. This is of course a stunning achievement in fiscally hard times, and you, the graduates, are evidence of Bill's success.

*So this is public; this is why we pay taxes.*

I leave you with a thought from the political theorist Hannah Arendt (1958), from the *Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), where she argues for *the vita activa*. Arendt takes the position that public is not simply a noun or an adjective. At its most compelling, public is a verb: a set of commitments, your commitments, activities, labors, solidarities, disappointments, and desires. Public grows deep and wide so we can all lean upon each other in good times and even more so in trying times. Public captures the dreams of the parents and grandparents sitting in the balcony of Avery Fisher Hall, reflecting your blood, sweat, and

tears, so that your babies could sit here, in the orchestra, with caps and gowns.

In closing, a mighty oak grows on Fifth. The Graduate Center stands strong and sturdy, public and democratic, diverse and intellectually provocative. But these are precarious times, financially, politically, ideologically, and intellectually. Unless we redress the unregulated rush to privatize and reclaim the soul of the public, you could be the pruned generation, among the last to enjoy the sweet roots of public support. And so, to the gorgeous, brilliant, and diverse graduating diaspora of the Graduate Center 2011, I wish you lives of meaning, justice, friendship, outrage, joy, long walks, sweet dreams, thrilling scholarship, and laughter.

Give money to the Graduate Center, remember your roots, and go public—everywhere you can.

**The Graduate Center** is the doctorate-granting institution of the City University of New York, the largest urban university in the United States. The only consortium of its kind in the nation, the Graduate Center draws its faculty of more than 1,700 members mainly from the CUNY senior colleges and cultural and scientific institutions throughout New York City.

Since its inception in 1961, the Graduate Center has grown to an enrollment of 4,700 students in over thirty doctoral programs and seven master's degree programs in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, and has awarded 10,000 doctoral degrees.

The Graduate Center also hosts the CUNY Baccalaureate Program for Unique and Interdisciplinary Studies, through which undergraduates can earn bachelor's degrees by taking courses at any of the CUNY colleges; the School of Professional Studies and the associated Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies; and the Graduate School of Journalism.

The Graduate Center is housed in the former B. Altman building at 365 Fifth Avenue, between 34th and 35th Streets, a landmark structure redesigned to meet the specific needs of a 21st-century institution of advanced learning. The campus features library facilities, state-of-the-art computing facilities, seminar rooms, a dining commons, and student lounges, as well as a cultural and conference complex that includes the Harold M. Proshansky Auditorium, the Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall, the James Gallery, and the Martin E. Segal Theatre.