

**Savannah Shange**, *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0668-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-0576-6 (cloth)

*Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco* by Savannah Shange is both a text full of insights and an inciteful text, destined to spawn new modes and avenues of inquiry. In her own words, Shange explains her book as, among other endeavors, an “ethical and intimate portrait of progressive statecraft” (p.6) and an “attempt to engage anthropology as a practice of abolition” (p.10). A former teacher, Shange returns to her old school, Robeson Justice Academy in southeastern San Francisco, as the primary site of ethnographic investigation. In brief, her work offers a deep, critical exploration of the myriad contradictions of progressivism in a city ontologically defined by its ostensible commitments to progressive struggle, at a school similarly wedded to ideals of progressive theorizing and practice. A layered and complex text complete with compelling concepts like *progressive dystopia*, *carceral progressivism*, and *abolitionist anthropology*, Shange’s text has many urgent implications for critical scholars, educators, and activists.

Importantly, *Progressive Dystopia* can be read in many iterations: as a critical ethnography of an urban school, as a rich theoretical text, as an abolitionist manifesto, and perhaps, most importantly, as an extended love letter to Black peoples. To weave together these many folds, Shange engages an equally layered array of thinkers, including critical anthropologists of the state, Black feminist anthropologists, and Black radical thinkers. While locating her work in the sociohistorical place of San Francisco, Shange’s primary discursive arenas are conversations on: (1) the relationship between multiracial coalitional politics and anti-Blackness; (2) the role of the state in creating, defining, and managing anti-Black spatial regimes; and (3) the ways in which a Black feminist and abolitionist anthropology might engender a new path toward liberation. Of particular note is *Progressive Dystopia*’s instructive utilization of works by Christina Sharpe, Sylvia Winter, Katherine McKittrick, and Saidiyah Hartman, among others. Given her own positionality as a Black queer woman and her

commitment to a Black feminist epistemology, Shange thoughtfully centers the voices of Black women participants and scholars alike.

In total, *Progressive Dystopia* has seven chapters, meant to examine “seven concrete ‘wins’ in the context of Robeson Justice Academy and their relative cost to Black Frisco residents ... ” (p.18). In her third chapter, “‘Why Can’t We Learn African?’: Academic Pathways, Coalition Pedagogy, and the Demands of Abolition”, Shange takes her readers to a novice Spanish teacher’s classroom to contemplate the racial-spatial consequences of academic pathways, such as a state-mandated foreign language requirement. Noting that the lower-level Spanish classes were the “Blackest academic spaces at Robeson” (p.46), Shange considers Black student resistance in a beginners’ class, motivated in part by a student’s desire to “learn African”. The teacher demonstrates a strong commitment to a “pedagogy of coalition”, but Black students use humor and defiance as a means of refusing a progressive multiracial politics that decenters their experiences in a bout of what Jared Sexton (2010) calls “people of color blindness”. This act of refusal on the part of the Black students, according to Shange, represents the “friction between antiracism and abolition” (p.62), or the ways in which progressive efforts to combat racism might overlook the specificities of anti-Blackness that keep Black students in a persistent state of surveillance and captivity. Building on Damien Sojoyner’s (2016) notion of “educational enclosure”, Shange asserts that “[i]f we imagine Sojoyner’s enclosure as composed of brick walls of disposability, punishment, and control, then Robeson breaks apart those walls and repurposes the very same bricks as cobblestones on the path to higher education, racial solidarity, and participation in social justice movement” (p.55). Employing pathways as an “infrastructural metaphor for carceral-progressive schooling” (p.55), Shange explains pathways as also being a “dual disciplinary technology” that both limits the movement of its students and disciplines the very educational desires of both students and teachers (p.56). While admitting that Robeson has exemplary outcomes, Shange identifies the lack of African language instruction as a further example of institutional anti-Blackness. She concludes the chapter by theorizing the aforementioned friction into infrastructural metaphor as a “roadblock on the progressive pathway – a willful defiance of the best-case scenario of left politics” (p.65). Channeling the radical

insights of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) and what is “beyond the beyond” she argues that “[a]bolition is the unreasonable, irreverent wilderness that exceeds and undermines any infrastructural attempt to ‘develop’ its lands, even in the service of revolution” (p.65).

Shange continues her rigorous analysis of Robeson in her fourth chapter, “The Kids in the Hall: Space and Governance in Frisco’s Plantation Futures”. Using a critical race-informed staff meeting as a jumping-off point, Shange unpacks the circulating discourses about student hallway comportment. In doing so, she aims to “surface the overlapping geographies of the plantation and the colonial settlement” and “map the contemporary school space as contiguous with these sites of confinement and expulsion” (p.19). To undergird her analysis, she draws on McKittrick’s (2013) notion of “plantation futures” and Hartman’s (1997) notion of an afterlife of slavery to understand how anti-Black spatial regimes operate in the present to hold Black students captive and contribute to what Joyce King (2017) calls “epistemological nihilation”. In reading the school/classroom as a continuation of plantation logics, due in part to the compulsory nature of schooling, she re-reads Black students presence in the hallways as a refusal and an act of “Frisco fugitivity” (p.91). Shange’s reference to fugitivity calls forth the Black radical tradition and, specifically, the work of Cedric Robinson (2017: 3) who writes: “Rather than confront the system as the system, ... [Black folks] removed themselves from it. They created maroon communities which in some instances ... became republics themselves.” H.L.T. Quan (2017: 174-175) extends the idea of maroon communities to explain that “[t]he practice of marronage is ... the willful attempt to resist being governed ... free men and women negotiated their own terms of living, and in the process, negated the terms of order”. This final comment is apropos as hanging out in the hallways is often seen as a *willful* defiance, a term often used to justify the mass expulsion of Black bodies from school. In her abolitionist theorizing, Shange renarrativizes willful defiance as a “critique of civil society, which ... is made whole through the exclusion of blackness from the social body” (p.140).

In light of Shange’s many successes, it is also important to take a moment to consider where *Progressive Dystopia* comes up short. Perhaps ironically, while developing her critique of multiracial politics, Shange puts forth ideas that present their own racial problematics. First,

while Shange should receive praise for her scholarly engagement with settler colonialism, her use of certain Indigenous ideas can be read as troubling. At times, she universalizes Indigenous concepts to explain Black experiences and does so without acknowledging the Indigenous origins or connotations. These examples include her discussions of “Black survivance” (p.10) and “oh-so-Black terra nullius” (p. 76). Furthermore, in regard to her discussion of “Frisco indigeneity” (p.112), Shange relies on a single source about Honduras (Anderson 2009) in order to justify her claim that Black people can be seen as Indigenous in San Francisco, insofar as they resided there before mass gentrification. Her use of these ideas not only coopts Indigenous concepts, but also functions as a form of Indigenous erasure by falsely equating displacement born of gentrification with displacement born of settler colonialism. Second, her work lacked a robust discussion of how to cultivate what she and a colleague (Liu and Shange 2018) have called “thick solidarity” between the Black students and the non-Black students of color at Robeson. While I agreed with her critique of an “our lives matter” event leading to the “cannibalizing” of Black suffering (p.3), I wondered what a pedagogy of thick solidarity would look like. In doing so, I thought of Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2017: 238) call for an “abolition geography” that operates as “a way of studying, and of doing political organizing, and of being in the world, and of worlding ourselves”. Education scholar Bettina Love (2019: 12) extends the idea of abolitionist practice, specifically abolitionist teaching, to give meaning to Black lives. She argues that abolitionist teaching “asks educators to acknowledge and accept America and its policies as anti-Black, racist, discriminatory, and unjust and to be in solidarity with dark folx and poor folx fighting for their humanity and fighting to move beyond surviving”.

As a complete work, *Progressive Dystopia* is a discerning and devoted read for scholars interested in progressive politics, studies of statecraft, and abolitionist approaches to combating anti-Blackness. Shange’s work is a powerful project with serious ramifications for scholars across many fields of study. She builds on previous education scholarship (Ewing 2018; Sojoyner 2016) that broaches similar issues in ways that not only bridge disciplinarily distinct theories and epistemologies, but breaks new ground in the process. Of special note is her deployment of the Black radical tradition (Johnson and Lubin 2017) to interrogate schools and

statecraft, which yields a new vision of anthropology grounded in the priorities and practices of abolition.

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