

BOOK REVIEW

Miguel N. Abad
University of California, Irvine

Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism and Schooling in San Francisco

Savannah Shange

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As you drive up the oft-congested US Highway 101 North freeway toward the downtown San Francisco skyline, one cannot help but fix your eyes on the 325-meter-high phallic structure that punctures the city's perpetual foggy layers. Erected between 2013 through 2018, the shimmering chromatic façade of the Salesforce Tower refracts not only light, but also the story of racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983/2000) in the city during the past decade: the congealing of the state, finance, real estate speculation and the rapacious tech economy. This reconfiguration has been intertwined with the intense velocities of gentrification, and the decades-long displacement of poor and working-class Black and Latinx families in neighborhoods such as Bayview/Hunters Point and the Mission. Concurrently, this period has also brought victories for racial liberalism and the politics of recognition (Coulthard, 2014) as the city elected its first Asian American mayor Ed Lee in 2011. After his unexpected passing in 2017, the city welcomed the appointment (and the eventual election) of its current and first Black mayor London Breed in 2018. This current iteration of San Francisco—located on unceded Yelamu Ohlone land—is defined through the heightening contradictions between the city's imagined "progressive" bonafides and the unyielding burdens foisted upon poor and working-class Black, Indigenous and other people of color.

In *Progressive Dystopia*, anthropologist Savannah Shange offers a meditation on the afterlives of slavery (Hartman, 2008) and the climates of antiracism (Sharpe, 2016) in San Francisco. Shange crafts her theoretical insights based on her time as an educator and later as a researcher and volunteer over the span of six years at the city's most radical social justice-oriented high school—"Robeson Justice Academy." The book's ethnographic vignettes are crafted from quotidian moments in the classroom, during faculty meetings, and school-wide

assemblies. Shange situates her theoretical project in close relation to the traditions of critical Black studies through soigné engagements with abolitionist theorists including Katherine McKittrick, Joy James and Fred Moten, as well as theorists associated with the tendencies of afropessimism such as Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, Hortense Spillers, and Frank Wilderson.

Through this project, Shange aims to craft an abolitionist anthropology, which she describes as an “ethic and scholarly mode that attends to the interface between the multisided anti-Black state and those who seek to survive it [...] its practice is a mode of reparative caring that seeks to be accountable to what is unaccounted for in social reform schemes” (p. 10). Unlike the dominant projects of liberal reformism, abolitionist methodologies are not only skeptical of the state, but are premised on its end. As such, an abolitionist anthropology also demands that we refuse the reformist grammar of conventional social sciences—especially within educational research—and the artificial boundaries of conventional policy analyses that conflate what is possible with what is practical. In this way, Shange’s methodology echoes the works of Octavia Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin and the traditions of science and speculative fictions that aim to imagine and craft futures of collective liberation beyond the confines of the state.

The text is palpably contentious as Shange produces generative frictions that stretch equity, social justice, and antiracism discourses to their breaking points. The existence of Robeson—a high school founded upon a decolonial ethos, a commitment to critical pedagogy, and a legacy of social justice activism—represents a triumph for the community. Yet, Shange asks us to recognize how even this victory is unable to dissolve the climate of captivity for the Black youth who coarse through the arteries of the school. She deploys the concept of carceral progressivism to articulate how well-intentioned educational equity efforts at Roberson reproduce and retrench antiblackness within the school. As such, Roberson is a microcosm of San Francisco style progressivism. For example, Shange situates herself within this paradox as she recognizes that Robeson is the best high school for a Black parent in San Francisco to send their child to receive a dignified education, while also acknowledging that Robeson suspended Black youth at the highest rate of any high school in the district. These contradictions underline the limitations of even the most avant-garde reformist efforts within state institutions that are rooted in the soil of settler colonialism and the meteorological phenomena of antiblackness.

Progressive Dystopia also critically engages with the (im)possibilities of multiracial coalitions in Robeson through the complex racial politics between Black and non-Black students, teachers, counselors, and administrators. More specifically, Shange unsettles the amalgamating terms of racial solidarity credos such as “Black and Brown,” echoing what Jared Sexton has described as “people-of-color-blindness” (Sexton, 2010). Adapting Frantz Fanon’s theoretical interventions, Shange employs “Black Skin, Brown Masks” as a technology of carceral progressivism at Robeson to underline how Black students, especially Black girls at the school, were encouraged to “approximate Latinx modes of belonging in order to secure their citizenship in the benevolent state [...]” (p. 133). Moreover, the fallout from a fight between Black and Latinx students further cemented how the burdens of discipline and accountability for the conflict was most heavily shouldered by Black youth.

Another theoretical intervention offered by Shange is that of willful defiance, which she reconfigures from its original grounding within discourses of school discipline reform. The transmogrification of the concept reframes Black youths’ “uncivil” comportment at Robeson not as resistance, but more in line with what Kahnawà:ke Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson (2014) has described as refusal. Shange’s portrait frames Black youth’s rejections and

divestments in “progressivism” and the terms of its political project as part of a counterdiscourse of freedom (Hartman, 1997). Drawing from the theorization of the undercommons (Moten & Harney, 2004), these refusals are also examples of Black youth enacting a praxis of fugitivity as their loud behavior in “hallways and classrooms provide a hint of what a revolutionary future could look, sound and feel like [...]” (p. 106). These quotidian, embodied practices conjure sparks of imagined futures and perhaps the elements of a utopia.

Readers familiar with the genre of school-based ethnographies might presuppose that the story of Robeson Justice Academy is that of “another failing school.” On the contrary, Shange’s analyses and assessments are not driven by neoliberal discourses of “education reform”. The text highlights how Robeson is in many aspects successful in providing the relatively best high school environment for Black students within the racio-political-economic landscapes of current day San Francisco. This achievement can be attributed to the school’s steadfast resistance to testing regimes, standardized curriculum and banking pedagogies. The school is the apotheosis of what can be realized through state schooling projects founded upon equity and antiracism. Conversely, the story of Robeson is also an uncomfortable lesson about contemporary social justice projects and their tendency to inadequately reckon with antiblackness and the afterlife of slavery.

One might critique Shange for not offering more tangible interventions to address anti-Black racism within schools. It is true that *Progressive Dystopia* offers no easily actionable solutions for equity-oriented teachers, administrators and other educators who are seeking a resource for “best practices.” Moreover, some teacher education programs, and education researchers might find the premises of the text to be excessively unsettling and despondent. At the same time, the perceived limitations of *Progressive Dystopia* also contain much of its generative potential. More broadly, the text’s arguments point to the conceptual dead ends of many of our questions as education researchers. Still, too much of what makes education research (il)legible is premised upon technocratic grammar as well as the conflation of education and schooling (Abad et al., 2019). Shange reminds us how conventional equity frameworks—multiculturalism, culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogies and so on—can grow sour, impotent and unequipped to pose the unsettling, yet necessary questions that we may be unwilling or afraid to ask. What would it mean to take on the project of decoupling education from schooling? What would it mean for education scholars—especially those whose careers are contingent upon studying schooling—to take up what David Stovall (2018) has described a politics of school abolition? Can schooling as it has existed throughout the history of United States—a technology imbricated with the specters of settler colonialism, antiblackness and racial capitalism—be redeemed? Ultimately, *Progressive Dystopia* responds with the unsettling coda, “What if it can’t?”

Resonant with the relative impacts of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s (2012) seminal articulation of decolonization, as well as Damien M. Sojoyner’s (2016) deconstruction of the school-to-prison-pipeline framework, *Progressive Dystopia* offers another forceful paradigmatic shift for critical education discourse. Shange’s portrait offers a provocative case for educators and researchers to take up antiblackness on its own terms as a theoretical and practical matter within critical interrogations of education. In his essay on contemporary urban architecture, Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson (2003) evoked the axiom “that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (p. 76). Shange reminds us that the end of the world has already come for many Black, Indigenous, and nonwhite peoples across the globe. The project of abolition is to bring about the apocalypse of this dystopia, so that something new can

be born. Still, even under the most ideal of circumstances, futurity (apocalypse or not) offers no guarantees.

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