

BOOK REVIEWS

**Progressive Dystopia:
Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco**
By Savannah Shange
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With the rise of attention to systemic Black death in the 20th century, public and private institutions have been pressured to take a stance of opposition to racial bias and violence. Written with meticulous clarity, Savannah Shange's (2019) book, *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco*, captures how ideologies of progressive "winning" responses from educational institutions are part of the liberal state and embedded in the educational architecture, which is itself the problem. Building on Fred Moten, Katherine McKittrick, Sylvia Wynter, Saidiya Hartman, and many other scholars of antiracism, she uses three thematic arguments: progressive dystopia, carceral progressivism, and wilful defiance, that set up an abolitionist critique. Her incisive analysis is crucial to imagine a world in which Black freedom goes beyond the realm of inclusion and creates a new one that values Black life in all shapes and forms.

Shange (2019) lays out how schools are part of a landscape of progressive dystopia that is "perpetually a colonial place that reveals both the possibilities and limits of the late liberal imaginary" (p. 11). Situating school reform practices as inherently antiracist, counterintuitive to their intended purpose, carceral progressivism unpacks schools "as a pinnacle of efficiency for late liberal statecraft because the discursive narratives (e.g., liberalist) and material gains (e.g., a justice-themed public high school) of redistributive social movements are cannibalized and repurposed as rationales for dispossession" (p. 15). Through Meiners's (2007) and Sojoyner's (2016) analyses, which establish schools (and prisons) as sites of ongoing contestation and resistance, Black students, staff, and families still face the re-enactment of logics of Black punishment and disposability at The Robeson Justice Academy, the school where Shange conducted her fieldwork.

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She succeeds in crafting a truly meaningful ethnography exploring the tensions and paradoxes of coalition within the bounds of the state, i.e., progressive social reform which “can perpetuate antiblack racism even as they seek to eliminate it” (p. 14) through her theorization of carceral progressivism. This concept is central to her analysis, building on Saidiya Hartman’s (2019) theorization of the afterlife of slavery and the limited imagination of reconstructionist ideals constructed at the behest of a state only interested in the productivity rather than the welfare of its subjects. By positioning this analysis in a school purpose-built to attend to the ever-more dispossessed urban low-income population of left-leaning San Francisco, Shange illuminates how even institutions formed on the basis of social justice and liberation do so at the cost of Black life. This book is haunted by the real death and displacement of Black children, as Shange takes care to remind us.

Carceral progressivism, in practice, seeks to rid schools of “roadblocks” in the pathways it creates to provide youth of color normative matriculation in the educational system. These “roadblocks” often take the form of the wilful defiance of Black children seen as too unruly and unmalleable to conform to the myopic conceptions of professionalization being required of them by several actors. From the state down to the supposed allies seeking their liberation, these children are targets for extensive punitive measures, or even complete exclusion the citizen-human framework. This modus operandi makes The Robeson Justice Academy the owner of the highest suspension rate of Black students in its district. By focusing particularly on the displacement and disposability of Black girls, *Progressive Dystopia* by Shange hones in on the gendered dimensions of antiblackness, in which Black girls are policed just as much as Black boys, but the direness of their vulnerability is often absent from public discourse.

Shange disentangles the promises of Robeson’s mission and their progressive curriculum in the midst of a larger socio-political landscape of racialized displacement and gentrification. In chapter 6, Robeson’s fissures come to light with their response to an after-school fight. The Principle called the police on youth not enrolled in the school (including a former student) and enacted an institutional model of solidarity. This model posits the students’ peers in the community as outsiders and fails to address structural power which “...doesn’t make room for dissent of rage, but instead demands the removal of young people without acknowledging that there may be valid concerns at the heart of the conflict” (130). Robeson perpetuated the same antiblack disciplinary practice of policing that dehumanizes Black students, but in particular Black girls; who were just as likely as Black boys to be over-policed, contrasting “more conventional pattern[s] of school discipline in which female gender functions as a protective factor against suspension and expulsion” (108). Instead, Robeson’s less punitive model positions Blackness manifesting “as and in excess - Black children’s “stuff” can only ever be extra: their voices, their behavior, the discipline they face” (140) and “as a stranger in a literal sense, foreignizing kids who have lived round the way longer than the school has been in existence” (135). Revealing Robeson’s failure as a progressive institution, Shange leaves us with an important question: what is school for?

By theorizing Afrarealism, Shange “recovers Black girl flesh from its disposability at the margins of settler democracy...” (114). These margins, within the context of social justice work, are often created from the language of coalition which erases Black struggle under the guise of inclusivity and shared struggle. Through such practices as changing #BlackLivesMatter to #OurLivesMatter, as the school’s sanctioned activism does, racial hierarchies are effectively reproduced in progressive spaces, in this case, the majority Latinx population of the school. Though this ethnography engages intimately with the Afropessimist theory of Frank Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, to configure the reality in which the mechanisms of the institution are continuously predicated and perpetuated upon Black death, Shange offers us sight beyond the finality of this paradigm. Early on in the book’s footnotes we are treated to an anecdote of Robeson’s founding, where an old American flag is found on the site of what is to become the school. In true decolonial spirit, a staff member asks, “Should we burn it?” This question is left unanswered, and thus the crux of this book’s argument is then revealed. It is never enough to persist within the oppressive landscapes we are given without committing to dismantling them. In mission and methodology, Shange offers us an abolitionist anthropology from which to conceive and commit to the liberation of Black life.

References

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