

Review of Progressive Dystopia:

**Abolition, Anti-Blackness, and Schooling in  
San Francisco, by Savannah Shange, Durham:  
Duke University Press, 2019**

**Siobhan Brooks**

Department of African American Studies at California State  
University, Fullerton

skingbrooks@fullerton.edu

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French sociologist, in 1831 visited the United States to observe U.S. democracy, and in 1835 he wrote *Democracy in America*. One of the observations Tocqueville made was that slavery coexisted with ideals of freedom. This observation from almost 200 years ago informs Savannah Shange's groundbreaking book, *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Anti-Blackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*. As a Black person born and raised in the Sunnydale Housing Projects in San Francisco (one of Shange's references), I recognized what she coins as "carceral progressivism," referring to how reformers (often white) invested in notions of racial justice rely on police and other forms of discipline and expulsion to maintain a controlled vision of community and progress. The three thematic arguments she uses are: progressive dystopia, carceral progressivism, and willful defiance to make the case for an abolitionist critique.

San Francisco with its liberal and progressive history can be viewed as a microcosm of how U.S. democracy works, especially

for Black people on the margins of society. This is the case in San Francisco with its Black 5% population, where most are segregated into housing projects and schools with high expulsion rates. Both white liberal progress and anti-Blackness coexist to create a progressive San Francisco where Blackness is both erased and contained. The site of Shange's ethnography is Robeson Justice Academy (which is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the students), a vision of social justice involving anti-Blackness and the carceral state. Shange builds off Saidiya Harman's (2019) theory of the afterlife of slavery to contextualize Black students at Robeson Justice Academy.

Robeson Justice Academy prides itself on being multicultural and invested in social justice "wins," (2) which Shange urges the reader to question: Wins for Whom? Who wins and who loses. In this context of winners and losers, it is the Black students who lose in spite of racist teachers being fired, the use of Spanish to enhance college access, and diversity assemblies---all of which absorbed the school of taking full responsibility for its own carceral practices. For example, Robeson Justice Academy has a 24% Black student population, but 80% of students suspended are Black (84), reinforcing the school to prison pipeline pattern so common in urban schools. Robeson, similar to Ferguson and Cape Town are spaces that contain Black people, reflective of a rapidly gentrifying city that keeps pushing Black people closer to the edges of invisibility.

Shange underscores the role of gender when exploring punishment and discipline of Black bodies. Contrary to the narrative of Black boys and men being the main targets of police/state violence, Shange argues that Black girls have the highest suspension rates. This fact coincides with Kimberle Crenshaw's report, "Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected (2016), which outlines the school to prison pipeline for Black girls.

This reality is illustrated in what Shange terms ‘Black Girl Ordinary,’ which illustrates her use of willful defiance of the Black girls at Robeson. Black Girl Ordinary is the Black girl body undisciplined, shaped by crisis to develop new skills and new modes of living (99). Similar to the hashtag, #Black Girl Magic, Black Girl Ordinary refuses to be invisible and as a form of Black girl self-making is what is subject to policing at schools such as Robeson (100). It is a counter to ‘Black Boy Special’ which signifies the urgency society responds to problems plaguing Black boys—many also affecting Black girls.

The backstory of housing displacement among Black and Latinx kids at Robeson reflects the desire to erase what does not fit in the white progressive agenda. Shange references the inevitable demonization of the Sunnydale Housing Projects, which is part of a nation-wide movement to relocate public housing residents and remodel unlivable units. Relocation of housing tenants and remodeling of public housing is indicative of Shange’s carceral progressivism, where state violence comes in the form of possible homelessness and the destruction of communities for housing where it is not guaranteed that residents can return.

The core of Shange’s work is abolitionist ethnography embedded in a reimagining of Black futures where schools such as Robeson serve Black and Latinx communities while centering Black lives. Throughout the book, Blackness is flattened out to make room for multiculturalism (hence a sign in front of the school Shange references that was changed from Black Lives Matter to All Lives Matter.) Racial hierarchies are reinscribed in the unequal treatment of Black and Latinx students regarding curriculum and punishment, reflecting Black social status in San Francisco at large where Blackness must make room for diversity and anti-Black multicultural agendas. In the abolitionist futures, Shange imagines schools like Robeson would serve Black and Brown communities instead of neoliberal carceral projects.