

Chapter One

# #OurLivesMatter

Mapping  
an Abolitionist  
Anthropology



Our Lives Matter. Courtesy Marcus Hung, Room 212 Productions.

In the fall of 2014, the website of the Robeson Justice Academy<sup>1</sup> prominently featured an image of two hundred or so mostly brown hands raised in the air, some resolute, some reluctant. The young people were crowded onto a crumbling blacktop basketball court, holding signs that read “Hands Up! Don’t Shoot!” and “Murder Is Illegal—Arrest the Officer.” The whole-school photo shoot was organized by youth leaders with the consent of school staff, and taken the week after a grand jury in Ferguson, Missouri, refused to charge police officer Darren Wilson in the killing of Black<sup>2</sup> teenager Michael Brown. The image is a reflection of the small public high school’s mission to offer culturally responsive, social justice-themed education to low-income youth of color. The walls are emblazoned with graffiti murals reading “Equity” and “Decolonize”; Audre Lorde and Frantz Fanon are enshrined in the core curriculum. Nestled in the hills of one of the last working-class neighborhoods in San Francisco, Robeson is the product of a hard-fought campaign led by Black, Latinx,<sup>3</sup> Asian American and Polynesian parents, students, and educators to open a community-based high school, and thus represents the fruits of collective, multiracial struggle. The photo’s presence as the outsize header on the Robeson website, overlaid with the caption “#OurLivesMatter,” indexes a critical, even combative, relationship between the institution and the carceral state that killed Mike Brown.

However, despite this public stance of opposition to racial bias, the year this photo was taken, Robeson had the district’s highest suspension rate for Black students, as well as far higher rates of disciplinary referrals and expulsions. How, then, do we reconcile Robeson’s exceptionally punitive disciplinary practices with its institutional narratives of social justice and liberation as exceptional? Further, what does a place like Robeson, roundly regarded as a “win” for progressive-left reformers, tell us about who loses when “we” win? How is the “our” of #OurLivesMatter raced, gendered, and classed? Who is disposable in a progressive dystopia, the real-life city of mirrors where diversity is king, settlers keep settling, and slavery never stopped?

By replacing “Black Lives Matter” with “Our Lives Matter,” Robeson dis-course uneasily skirts the tension that erupted around the co-opting of the hashtag by other marginalized communities, like #BrownLivesMatter and #MuslimLivesMatter.<sup>4</sup> When “our lives matter” at multiracial Robeson, blackness is eclipsed by the more equivocal “people of color.” The dissonance within what initially feels like such a liberatory coalitional move is

sharpened by the signs in the front row held by a series of Latina girls reading, “My generation is next—don’t shoot.” The performance of racial analogy is both cathartic and politically strategic. A young Latino man, Alex Nieto, died in the street after he was gunned down by the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) just weeks before this picture was taken. In part, the young women’s plea represents the blackening of Polynesian and Latinx bodies in a white and Chinese city, and the brutality of dispossession as distributed across inherited axes of racialization. This mode of racial solidarity cannibalizes Black suffering—in order to state that their generation is “next,” non-Black people of color have to set Black death in stasis, already a fact, a cautionary tale that might ward off state execution.

*Progressive Dystopia* attends to the tensions between coalition, anti-blackness, and the state by documenting the afterlives of slavery as lived in one corner of San Francisco. The argument of this book turns on the generative antagonism between “our” and “Black” in the mattering of lives. By examining a series of successful progressive reforms, and what they cost Black communities, I critique “winning” as the dominant logic of social justice work. I ask, “Who loses when ‘we’ win?” not so much to expand the “we” of winning to an ever more inclusive list of deserving subjects, but to ask what becomes impossible when we engage in *contest* as the primary mode of Black politics—this is the differential between revolution and abolition. Revolution seeks to win control of the state and its resources, while abolition wants to quit playing and raze the stadium of settler-slaver society for good.

In his treatise on the aims and methods of Black studies, Fred Moten argues for the conceptualization of “abolition and reconstruction . . . as ongoing projects animating the study of comparative racialization as well as Black studies, two fields that will be seen as each other’s innermost ends, two fields that will be understood through the claim they make on—their thinking of and in—blackness” (Moten 2008: 1745–46). “Reconstruction” here invokes both the postbellum experiment with democracy that was precipitously crushed by *de jure* racism (Du Bois [1935] 2014) and the leftist recuperation of the state that animates the political imaginary of mainstream ethnic studies and its political corollaries in the movements for immigrant, racial, and economic justice. Reconstruction is a hue of revolution: it assumes the state is both inevitable and recuperable, and that we must ensure that the lofty rhetoric of citizenship is equitably applied across lines of racial and ethnic difference. From the perspective of abo-

lition, the universalizing rhetoric of the liberal state *is itself* the problem. Moten positions blackness as the articulable joint between ethnic studies and Black studies, whereby the degree to which either project reaches toward an abolitionist horizon is dependent on its conceptual and material relation to blackness.

By splashing the #OurLivesMatter photo on its website, Robeson makes what Moten calls “a claim” on blackness, as does the broader multiracial progressive movement that enlists blackness as a central conceit of people-of-color politics. But when #OurLivesMatter, it is only in their *ourness* that Black folks’ lives matter, because they, *we*, are one of “us.” And yet, as *Progressive Dystopia* demonstrates, being hurt, being mistrustful, being unapologetically Black can get both students and teachers expelled from “us” because they no longer deserve to be in this special place or be a citizen of this ad hoc polity. Robeson is a small, resistant, progressive, and yet imminently *civil* society, the meniscus of which is kept taut by the internalized policing required under the regime of carceral progressivism, and punctuated by the spectacle of Black expulsion from its exceptional space.

The lethal distance between “our” and “Black” is particularly instructive at a moment when democratic socialism had reentered mainstream political discourse with Bernie Sanders’s 2016 presidential bid. From bumper stickers in the school parking lot to zealous Facebook posts, Robeson staff members were vocal about their support of the Sanders candidacy. Though Sanders lost, Black people and people of color were the presumed beneficiaries of a democratic socialist presidency. The presumption fails because Black flesh is always in excess, uncivil, and marked by its incongruity with the progressive project, to which we remain narratively central, and yet materially surplus. Progressivism is fundamentally a reconstructionist politic embedded *within* liberal logics—it aims to hold the state accountable to its promise of democracy and justice. While the protagonist of progressivism’s political narrative has expanded from the white working class to include the Black underclass and the undocumented Brown migrant, its story is fundamentally a state romance—“social justice” means living happily ever after with the antiracist, distributive state. Abolition is a messy breakup with the state—rending, not reparation. To tease out the incongruities between abolition and progress, centrality and excess, the next section zooms out from this snapshot of kids on a foggy hill in Frisco to the broader intellectual topography that shapes this project.

## Ethnography in the Wake: Statecraft and the Afterlife of Slavery

The now-iconic “Hands up, don’t shoot” gesture embodied by Robeson students was part of a wave of marches, rebellions, and digitally mediated forms of protest against police brutality across the US. In the city of San Francisco, neighbors rose up in response to the state killings of Jessica Williams, Mario Woods, Luis Góngora Pat, Amilcar Perez-Lopez, and Alex Nieto, while across the Bay Area, the police murders of Stephon Clark, Oscar Grant, and Gary King Jr. sparked rallies and vigils. “Hands up, don’t shoot” juxtaposes a physical pose of surrender with the palpable presence of communal power: it is at once a plea and a demand, one that challenges the fatal power of the state and its armed agents. While associated with the police killing of Mike Brown, the broader social movement that has coalesced nationally around the murders of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Korryn Gaines, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner extends this demand beyond the spectacle of police killing to include an array of violences wrought by the state. For the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), a coalition of over forty Black-led organizations,

state violence takes many forms—it includes the systemic underinvestment in our communities, the caging of our people, predatory state and corporate practices targeting our neighborhoods, government policies that result in the poisoning of our water and the theft of our land, failing schools that criminalize rather than educate our children, economic practices that extract our labor, and wars on our Trans and Queer family that deny them their humanity. (M4BL: 2014)

Articulated by Black activists working in urban centers across the US, including the very neighborhood where Robeson is located, this multilayered depiction of the harms of the state belies any simplistic or unitary approach to the state itself. Each mode of dispossession named herein is at work in the communities of southeast San Francisco: the Hunters Point toxic Superfund site abuts a huge public housing development; extractive urban development schemes have stripped the Fillmore, Mission, and South of Market neighborhoods of their Black, Latinx, and Filipinx economic bases; and Robeson itself has struggled with overpunishing Black students.

Instead of thinking about the state as a synonym for “government,” the M4BL statement presents a Black-centered political framework that the-

orizes the state as a set of practices that exceed any single apparatus or even a collection of them. These practices constitute *statecraft*, an evidentiary path of power that can be glimpsed ethnographically, even as it fails to cohere the state as an empirical object (much less a subject). Strangely enough for a book about social apocalypse, *Progressive Dystopia* hopes for the best—it is an ethical and intimate portrait of progressive statecraft. My commitment to Black life means I refuse to spectacularize Black abjection. Instead, I center the quotidian state practices that render blackness itself *as* abjection. By attending to statecraft as a site of Black study, I take up Katherine McKittrick’s urging to develop an analytic that “does something new to the black body—dislodging it as the only source of black knowledge (and therefore liberation), while also honoring it as the location through which black anti-colonial praxis emerges” (2017: 99). The web of harm articulated by M4BL is just such an analytic—one that Michel-Rolph Trouillot might sketch as an accumulation of state effects, whereby the state’s “materiality resides much less in institutions than in the reworking of processes and relations of power so as to create new spaces for the deployment of power” (2001: 127). Close attention to how progressivism is worked and reworked at Robeson ushers us into a hall of mirrors where, in Sylvia Wynter’s terms, the territory of late liberalism is contorted into the map of social justice (2006, 2014).

“Late liberal,” here, is a modifier that attempts to index the changing global landscape after the collapse of Fordist-Keynesianism, while also calling attention to the *continuities* between the neoliberal era and the age of globalization ushered in by transatlantic slavery and franchise colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the “late” liberal is animated by the unmodified “liberal.” Forged by what Sylvia Wynter (2001) calls Western ethnoclass Man’s overrepresentation of the human during the Renaissance era in Europe, liberalism and its attendant modes of material provisioning (capitalism, slavery) capacitate the production of blackness through its dysselection from humanity. For Wynter, the ex-slave archipelago that stretches across the globe from Africa to the Caribbean, and indeed, to San Francisco, has been “made to function, over several centuries, as that of the ultimate embodiment of *symbolic* death—as wholly human Others to *symbolic* life” (2015: 47). Her figures of Man<sub>1</sub> (*Homo politicus*) and Man<sub>2</sub> (*Homo oeconomicus*) anchor the territory of Black (im)possibility that this project seeks to map.

In keeping with this attention to the changing same, the *afterlife of slavery* is a temporal and theoretical frame that sutures statecraft to history, throwing shade on the promise of chronological time. Conceptualized by

Saidiya Hartman as a way to reference how “Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that was entrenched years ago,” it includes “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (2007: 6).<sup>6</sup> Like Hartman, “I, too, am the afterlife of slavery” (2007: 6)—my Black queer body is both research instrument and research subject.

Ethnographic practice is one way for us to apprehend “the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery” (Sharpe 2016: 8). Christina Sharpe’s invocation of “the wake” as the structuring temporality of blackness in/as/beyond the violence of slavery allows us to slow down the slippage between “Black Lives Matter” and “Our Lives Matter” so as to more faithfully construct a portrait of the American state in motion. One of the goals of this book is to stage an applied encounter between antiblackness theory (glossed more or less controversially as Afropessimism) and the critical anthropology of the state. Too often, blackness falls out of our frame when engaging late liberal governance, or else becomes subordinated as an exemplar of another phenomenon. Similarly, scholars of antiblackness ritually return to the Black body as a theoretical site, but because they work largely in the fields of English, history, and film studies, we don’t know much about how their interventions map onto blackness as lived and loved on a daily basis across the diaspora.

### Toward an Abolitionist Anthropology

In an effort to bring these divergent traditions into ethical relation, I introduce the concept of *abolitionist anthropology* as one of many possible names for apprehending the necessary conjuncture of antiblackness theory and a critical anthropology of the state. Abolitionist anthropology is one of an unruly brood of intellectual projects descended from the “decolonizing generation” christened by Jafari Allen and Ryan Jobson (2016). They use the term to refer to the wave of Black and allied anthropologists working in the 1980s and 1990s to forge an epistemological and methodological path toward an “anthropology for liberation” (Harrison 1991: 10). One of the key interventions of Faye Harrison’s landmark edited volume *Decolonizing Anthropology* was to develop an anthropology based in the “critical intellectual traditions and counter-hegemonic struggles of Third World peoples” (1991: 1), and thus most of the collected essays focused on the Caribbean

and Latin America, particularly because it was published at a time when the tides of both political insurgence and repression were high in the region. *Progressive Dystopia* attempts to apply the insights and imperatives of decolonial anthropology to the unhyphenated Black US context, to those of us stuck stateside with no flag of our own to wave among the Labor Day throngs on Eastern Parkway.\*

For Harrison, decolonial anthropology is all the more urgent because Black diasporic nations like Jamaica have achieved “sovereignty without emancipatory substance” (2008: 243), as they continue to bear the weight of neoliberal-cum-neocolonial dispossession. Critical anthropological engagement across the African diaspora has taken up the struggle to make good on the promises of the anti-imperial independence movements of the last half-century, particularly as the gains of nationhood are unevenly distributed across axes of difference (Pierre 2012; Smith 2016; Thomas 2005, 2011; Williams 1996). Black people descended from slaves held in the US have almost the inverse predicament: we have won the prize of legal emancipation without access to meaningful sovereignty. US statecraft unfolded seamlessly before and after the nonevent of 1863, trapping Black and indigenous communities within the borders of a settler country that thrives on our dispossession. Because of this, Harrison’s intervention of an “anthropology for liberation” in the Black US context may necessitate a focus on surviving the *ends* of settler states instead of, or at least prior to, the struggles of independent ones. Abolitionist anthropology transposes the analytic choreography of decolonial anthropology onto the late liberal US: *one more time from the top, this time on the right foot*.

Though the US is often skipped over in discussions of postcoloniality, it was the first nation to throw off the yoke of European dominance, only to fasten it onto the necks of enslaved Africans. The ongoing settler-colonial genocide of indigenous people and the sublimation of African people into

\* Every Labor Day, the West Indian Day Parade marches on Eastern Parkway, a broad thoroughfare that bisects Brooklyn, New York. Over a million revelers attend, most of whom carry small flags from any one of dozens of Caribbean countries and colonies, or are festooned from head to toe in their national colors. None of these flags fly freely—each is weighed down by the contradictions of post-colonial nationalism in the context of ongoing political struggle over structural adjustment, heteropatriarchal power structures, and exclusionary domestic and foreign policy. Still, I wish I had one—the wish is a longing for sovereignty never-to-come. For more on Black politics beyond the shadow of sovereignty, see *Non-Sovereign Futures* (Bonilla 2015).

Black objects through chattel slavery are twin structures upholding US sociality. Rather than being exceptional to the US, abolitionist scholarship is rooted in diasporic Africana studies, as is the dream of abolition itself: Haiti was the first decolonial nation in the world, which fought off both slavery and empire at the same time, and has been punished ever since. Twinned with attention to Haiti, there is a particularly rich ethnographic corpus examining gender, activism, and antiblack state violence in Brazil (Alves 2018; Perry 2013; Smith 2016). Much of the Black anthropological canon is already oriented toward abolition (cf. Bolles 2001; Buck 2001; Cox 2015; Drake and Baber 1990; Gwaltney 1993; McClaurin 2001; Thomas 2013a, 2013b; Williams 1996), and I use the term “abolitionist anthropology” to lift up this scholarly genealogy and my relation to it.

Antecedent to its location as a disciplinary mode, abolitionist anthropology is a genre of Black study. For Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “Study is what you do with other people. It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. . . . The point of calling it ‘study’ is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present” (Moten and Harney 2013: 110).

The “speculative practice” of study as sketched here is immediately recognizable to any ethnographer: we call it fieldwork. For anthropologists of Black people in the Americas, that *fieldwork* is never completely out of sight of another set of fields—cotton, cane, tobacco, rice. Our real-time is stitched together from “plantation futures” (McKittrick 2013), a variegated time-space called forth from the hold of the ship, the social life that animates the socially dead (Patterson 1982). This mode of heterotemporal study, then, also invokes the speculative practice of Black science fiction writers like Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and N. K. Jemisin, whose willingness to dream other worlds inspires my rendering of this one.

If, as Sharpe posits, “the question for theory is how to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, the afterlife of property, how, in short, to inhabit and rupture this episteme with their, with our, knowable lives” (2016: 50), an abolitionist anthropology finds its answers in the register of the quotidian, in the cruddy, ordinary facts of blackness (Povinelli 2011; Fanon 1967). Though I do not seek to make Black lives “knowable” as Sharpe suggests, given the tendency toward hubris that swells under the skin of thick description (Jackson 2013), *Progressive Dystopia* offers a few glimpses of Bay Area blackness as it “inhabit[s] and rupture[s] this episteme” of late liberalism. Significant, here, is the dyadic relation between inhabiting (living), and

rupturing (destruction): the syncopation, or “two-step,”<sup>7</sup> between the present durative tense of Black survivance and the future perfect of abolition. In this sense, abolitionist anthropology is in rhythm with what Elizabeth Povinelli calls the “sociology of potentiality” (2011: 16) while still getting down on *The One of endurance*.<sup>8</sup> *Progressive Dystopia* is an attempt to engage anthropology as a practice of abolition, an ethnography of the afterlife of slavery as lived in the Sucka Free City.<sup>9</sup>

Abolition is not a synonym for resistance; it encompasses the ways in which Black people and our accomplices work *within, against, and beyond* the state in the service of collective liberation. As an analytic, abolition demands specificity—the very kinds of granularity that ethnography offers as an accounting of the daily practices that facilitate Black material and symbolic death. Abolitionist anthropology, then, is an ethic and a scholarly mode that attends to the interface between the multisited anti-Black state and those who seek to survive it. In the process of unthinking the state, abolitionist anthropology joins two generations of attempts to reconceive a disciplinary project built on extractive logics, collusion, antiblackness, and colonialism. Emerging from deep relationality with ancestors and contemporaries, its practice is a mode of reparative caring that seeks to be accountable to what is unaccounted for in social reform schemes. This book is not a manual for how to be a better, more radical anthropologist. I offer it only as a provocation to *care* more than we can *know*, to extend our analyses past the ruins of the world (and the discipline) as we know it.

As a methodology, abolitionist anthropology has resonance with the broad rubric of engaged anthropology, which seeks to transform the discipline’s “inside baseball” reputation by inciting a broader conversation about the world as it is, and sometimes, as it should be. The boundaries and delineations of engaged anthropology are contested, but included are the interconnected fields of public, applied, and activist anthropologies. Public anthropology often refers to high-minded but accessible engagement with current events largely through journalism and mass media, while applied anthropology is often, but not always, carried out for a client and proposes concrete solutions for concrete (and discrete) problems. In contrast, activist anthropologists study social movements and conduct ethnographic work that is accountable to the vision of those movements (Hale 2006). Each of these anthropological modes makes a unique intervention in the field, and the distinctions between them help tune our attention to the varied interface between the practice of anthropology and the state. Because the late liberal state is an unruly set of overlapping processes, our attendant modes

of intellectual and political practice must also be agile as they target civil society and the free market as cognates of the state.

Echoing the multilingual harmony that sings through the sidewalks of San Francisco, I layer Black English, neighborhood dialects, and academic prose into the ethnographic text.<sup>10</sup> I am inspired by Aimee Cox's assertion that the social choreography of Black girls "can disrupt and discredit normative reading practices that assess young Black women's bodies as undesirable, dangerous, captive, or out of place" (2015: 28–29). In the pages of this book, I attempt to disrupt normative *writing* practices and dance a Black girl text to keep the narrative conventions of our discipline on their toes. I braid together three thematic arguments, which I outline in the following sections.

### Progressive Dystopia

As the first organizing theme, I figure San Francisco as a *progressive dystopia*, a perpetually colonial place that reveals both the possibilities and limits of the late liberal imaginary. In the current national climate, "progressive" has come to mean anyone to the left of the Democratic Party platform. The term can reference an incredibly diverse group of communities and individuals, some of whom have conflicting political imaginaries. For instance, Robeson as a school has an explicitly anti-American, decolonial vision.<sup>†</sup> In contrast, the Congressional Progressive Caucus lauds the "progressive promise" as a patriotic duty. Their 2016 "The People's Budget" platform reveals the allegiances inherent to their brand of progressivism: "Prosperity, Not Austerity: Invest in America" (CPC 2016). In this text, I use "progressive" to reference both the redistributive ideal and contests over how to realize it.

† An example of how this decolonial impulse played out at Robeson was the day the school moved into its current building, taking over the top floor of a middle school that had been open for thirty years. When the staff gathered for a planning meeting in the auditorium, a grandmotherly Spanish teacher who had lived through the Noriega years in Panama, climbed up and unhooked the huge American flag that hung on one side of the stage, next to the flag of the state of California. "Should we burn it?" she asked. The staff voted not to burn it, and instead put it in a box in a storage closet, but the fact that the staff voted on it in the first place is an indication of the Robeson's skeptical relationship to the American project, at least in the school's early institutional years.

The Congressional Progressive Caucus’s “progressive promise” framework signals the inherently utopian nature of the reformist endeavor, oriented as it is toward the recuperation of the American dream. To highlight the social conditions produced when the progressive promise is broken (or perhaps it was always already broken), I use the framework of *dystopia*, conventionally imagined as a fictional world that is considerably worse than, yet uncomfortably close to, one’s own. Like utopia, dystopia is also suffused with futurity, but weighted toward a negative valence that can produce anger, fear, hope, or complacency vis-à-vis the present. In *Economies of Abandonment*, Povinelli (2011) drafts science fiction foremother Ursula K. Le Guin as an intellectual collaborator, and uses the latter’s short story “The Ones Who Walked Away from Omelas” as the impetus for her exploration of tense and eventfulness in late liberalism. I also engage speculative fiction as an anthropological resource, and look to Black science fiction icon Octavia Butler as a compass in rendering the progressive dystopia.

Written twenty-five years ago, Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) is set in a California that is not postapocalyptic per se, in that there has been no single earth-shattering event like a permanent eclipse, and yet the social world has crumbled in the ruins of more mundane violence. The novel’s protagonist is Lauren Olamina, a young Black girl the same age as several Robeson students featured in this text. Indeed, in the fictional narrative, Lauren was born in 2009, the same year I began graduate study to work on this project. Over the course of the book, Lauren leads a ragtag, multi-racial group of survivors on a sojourn from the Los Angeles suburbs to a small town in Northern California, figuring out a way to live after the end of their world. The postapocalyptic frame is not hyperbolic—for Black and indigenous people in the Americas, the apocalypse came and never left, resulting in the dystopian reality of those of us enduring settler colonialism in the wake of chattel slavery (TallBear 2016). Far from fantastic, *Parable of the Sower* (and its sequel, *Parable of the Talents*) is thus instructive in helping marginalized communities imagine a futurity that is not hitched to the continuation of the status quo.

Though speculative fiction is central to Afrofuturist practice in its capacity to creatively envision Black utopias, I tie it here to dystopia and death.<sup>11</sup> Rather than an opposition, the utopic/dystopic impulse is a symbiotic dyad distinguished only by emphasis. “Utopia and dystopia in practice tend to test the boundaries of reality: the former approaches an ideal but rarely reaches it—stopped by the real world—and the latter makes visible various breaking points and vulnerabilities” (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash

2010: 6). Where utopia claps on the 1 and the 3, dystopia claps on the 2 and the 4. Both orientations belong in the rhythm section of what Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown call *visionary fiction*, “a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power” (Imarisha 2015: 4).

But Frisco ain’t fiction—it’s a steel-and-soot city filled with flesh-and-blood folks. What does it mean to read and write it as a dystopia, traditionally understood as an imagined rather than “real” place?<sup>12</sup> In their work to think across history and speculative fiction, Michael Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash assert that dystopia is a *practice* that extends beyond the fictional genre into the realm of lived experience: “Utopia, dystopia, chaos: these are not just ways of imagining the future (or the past) but can also be understood as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to reimagine their present and transform it into a plausible future” (2010: 3). An anthropological practice of dystopia demands that we stretch the range of our imagining beyond past and future to land squarely in the present, as we engage actors who are not only historically, but also socially and politically situated in their cultural contexts. In this sense, I practice dystopia on two scales: while this book is a dystopian text that labors to “[make] visible various breaking points and vulnerabilities” of late liberalism, I also argue that San Francisco is itself a *concrete dystopia* (Varsam 2003), one that provides the material basis that animates fictional texts like *Parable of the Sower*.

Just as utopias are pedagogical tools that educate our desires, dystopian practice provides an “education of perception” (Varsam 2003: 209), one that attunes us to death, dispossession, and disposability as codices to interpret reality. Crucially, a focus on social and material death is not just hateration<sup>‡</sup> for its own sake, but instead an attempt to challenge *life* as the only possible site of political valorization. If, as Jared Sexton suggests, “a politics of abolition could never finally be a politics of resurgence, recovery, or recuperation. It could only ever begin with degeneration, decline, or dissolution” (2014: 11),

‡ Brought into popular parlance by R&B legend Mary J. Blige’s 2001 single “Family Affair,” “hateration” derives in part from the term “player-hating” and is a concerted effort to delegitimize another Black person’s joy. In informal intellectual circles, Afropessimists like Sexton are derided as haters because they seek to center death and dying in Black theory, but a more generous reading suggests that they are attempting to hate the game rather than the player.

then dystopian narratives are key to constructing just such a politics. Abolition starts at the end of the world, and just like Lauren Olamina, Black folks in Frisco have a lot to teach us about how to survive the apocalypse.

Dystopia is also suffused with notions of place—its utterance invokes a where (here) and a when (now). The trouble is that blackness is perpetually *out* of place, and constantly running *out* of time (Audre told us we was “never meant to survive,” remember?).<sup>13</sup> The Bayview, Hunters Point, the Excelsior, the Moe—all of these neighborhoods are spatial coordinates of Black San Francisco, but “they are not where blackness comes from. *There is no from*. There is no there, or somewhere, or place that a black from is anchored to” (McKittrick 2017: 97). This unmooredness, “the fantastic nowhere of blackness” across the Americas is as close to an ontogeny as we gonna get, and it “allows us to puzzle out new and unexpected—and undisciplined and unacceptable—modes of being human” (McKittrick 2017: 99). Blackness is a topography without a territory, and by naming Frisco as a Black geography, I am not trying to solve the riddle of Black place, or to affix blackness to a seven-mile-square patch of hills on the Pacific coast. I invoke it as a way to spatialize the encounter between cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) and antiblack state violence. The state of California is a primary site of this collision. Critical geographer Ruthie Gilmore calls it the *Golden Gulag* (2007) because of its incongruous melding of ostentation and incarceration. Robeson in turn provides a concentrically nested instance of this phenomenon, in that its practices of exclusion as an overtly “radical” space reverberate with the exodus of Black people and people of color from the official “sanctuary city” of San Francisco.

## Carceral Progressivism

As a second overarching theme, I offer the concept of *carceral progressivism* to illuminate the paradoxical dynamic in which social reform practices, particularly those that target inequities in communities of color, can perpetuate antiblack racism even as they seek to eliminate it. We might recognize this as a sort of “cunning” of multiracial liberalism, whereby the acknowledgement of systemic injustice serves as an alibi for the retrenchment of that very system (Povinelli 2002). If the landscape is a progressive dystopia, then carceral progressivism is a key way to move material and discursive resources through that space—it is a routing and rerouting of power through the uneven, interlocked mechanisms of the state, private funders,

and civil society. “Carceral” in this sense refers not primarily to the state of being currently imprisoned or detained, but to the “carceral continuum” conceptualized by Loïc Wacquant (2000) as the circuit between the ghetto and the prison, relayed in large part by the punitive system of social welfare. Carceral progressives lament the systemic racism of the penal system, only to call upon police as collaborators in protecting their vision of community. More broadly, carceral progressivism is critical of capitalism, but not its enforcement, and seeks redistribution, not reparations. Carceral progressivism functions as a pinnacle of efficiency for late liberal statecraft because the discursive narratives (e.g., liberation) and material gains (e.g., a justice-themed public high school) of redistributive social movements are cannibalized and repurposed as rationales for dispossession.

In schools, carcerality is most often viewed through the lens of the school-to-prison pipeline, whereby zero-tolerance-style disciplinary policies disproportionately impact students of color, resulting in their arrest, detention, and eventual imbrication in the prison system. In contrast, Robeson Justice Academy pours immense resources into *avoiding* the school-to-prison pipeline through restorative justice and democratic practices, and yet *still* reenacts the logics of Black punishment and disposability by counseling young people to transfer out of the school and criminalizing the border between the school and the neighborhood. In the current national climate, scholars and activists are faced with a Manichean divide between friends on the left and foes on the right, whereby the former are invested in ending mass incarceration, and the latter in a law-and-order future. But what happens when both sides of the struggle for control over state resources rely on the same common sense of Black captivity? The marginalization of Black staff, students, and families at Robeson is an instantiation of how racialized carceral logic has stretched beyond literal confinement to shape the practice of social justice movements. As a framework, carceral progressivism brings our attention to the continuities between racism and antiracism, allowing us to disentangle intention from impact, and disrupt right/left dichotomies that can obscure emergent political worlds in places like southeast San Francisco.

## Willful Defiance

The final theme advanced in this book is *willful defiance*, which I use to trace the agentic flows that creatively adapt to and subvert the terms of carceral progressivism, exposing its incoherencies and fissures. The phrase

“willful defiance” originates in the California Board of Education disciplinary code, and I choose to repurpose state language as part of my analytic framework as a way to highlight how marginalized communities adapt the odds and ends of restrictive mechanisms as tools for survivance (Vizenor 2008). “Willful,” too, invokes Sara Ahmed’s work on the willful subject and its capacity to thwart liberal sovereignty. For Ahmed, willfulness is “what *gets in the way of what is on the way*. . . . To be judged willful is to become a killjoy of the future: the one who steals the possibility of happiness” (2014: 47). In the progressive dystopia, the will is that which pulls against the inevitability of social justice and robs the imminent reformed and antiracist state of its legitimacy. Rather than trying to fix upon the ontology of a willful subject, Ahmed instead traces the effects of that willfulness. Like her, I ask not “What is willfulness?” but “What is willfulness *doing*?” and offer an anthropological response to her philosophical question.

When faced with the chicanery of the nonprofit-industrial complex, Black employees and clients of Robeson willfully defy the constraints placed upon them, and are sometimes punished with expulsion from both the literal school space and from belonging to the just polity it anticipates building. Audra Simpson’s (2014) attention to form and voice as sites of illiberal sovereignty helps us perceive willfulness as a mode of abolition. Rather than read *willful defiance* as what she calls the “easy answer” (Simpson 2016: 333) of political resistance, or as a transparently liberatory project, I argue that it is better understood as a practice of Black refusal that not only rejects the political, but challenges the legitimacy of the state and its effects. By operating outside the frame of formalized protests like #OurLivesMatter (or even #BlackLivesMatter), willful defiance sours the legitimizing function of civil disobedience, and offers a grammar to speak a world beyond the state. Like the Cali proverb “Fuck tha police,” willful defiance is an abolitionist ethos that privileges the necessary over the possible. Over the course of this text, I share stories that illustrate the relationship between willful defiance and carceral progressivism, and how each escapes the grasp of the other as they flow through the geography of a progressive dystopia.

## Frisco Methods

You can stand at the corner of Twenty-Second and Capp in the Mission District while dozens of white tech workers stroll past toting compostable coffee cups and Timbuktu bags and still feel the tug of *La Misión*, the neigh-

borhood built by the cultural and political labor of generations of Latinx families, *y todavía sobreviviendo* in a deferential head nod here, a Los Bukis chorus wafting out of a second-floor window there. The old San Francisco and the new San Francisco are laid up on top of themselves, an urban palimpsest where social geographies chafe against each other to produce The City.<sup>14</sup> Just as Frisco is always peeking around the edges of gentrification, this formal ethnographic monograph teeters atop the foundation of sociopolitical relations that precede it. (“Frisco,” here, is not a synonym for “San Francisco,” though their geographic boundaries are coterminous—it’s a contested name for the city at the center of this study, jarring for some and heartwarming for others, used mostly by working-class folks, Black folks, and people of color in the Bay Area and throughout California. I use Frisco intentionally. Appearing without scare quotes or the italics of impending translation, Frisco dislodges the inherited logics of propriety in The City, and is a strategy that privileges the social lexicon of the key participants in this project.)

I worked at Robeson for six years BAE (before academic era)—I came of age as an educator and as an activist in The City. My political commitments have been indelibly shaped by born-and-bred Bay folks who welcomed a mouthy East Coast rap kid to their turf and their struggle. *Progressive Dystopia* is, among other things, an attempt to be accountable to those commitments in the practice of academic knowledge production. Methodologically, that meant developing a corpus of data grounded in the political economy of the new San Francisco while still epistemically privileging Frisco kids of all ages.

I am keenly aware of my presence as a guest in the Sucka Free City, and I offer this brief sketch of my fieldwork process not as a credential to prove my expertise, but to make plain the “how” of a Black feminist ethnography. I conducted formal fieldwork over the span of seven years, 2010–16. Prior to that, I was a program coordinator, college counselor, and classroom teacher at Robeson, and thus, the social and political entanglements informing my research reach back to the institution’s opening year in 2003. I began data collection in the summer of 2010, conducting initial interviews with veteran community activists and former Robeson students in the Bay Area. I returned for a three-week pilot research trip a year later in 2011, and attended the weeklong professional development and orientation for Robeson teachers. Because of a wave of fiscal austerity at the state level in California that year, Robeson did not have a final budget in time for the start of school that August, and could not hire any auxiliary personnel, including office or secu-

rity staff. For the first two weeks of school, I served as a volunteer “student advisor,” the revamped title for Robeson’s security staff, keeping a walkie-talkie on me and making sure students cleared out from the corner store in the morning and got to class in a relatively timely fashion. The most intensive period of fieldwork began the following year, when I spent another summer of community research and the full 2012–13 academic year at Robeson. During that time, I conducted just under fifty individual interviews, five focus groups, and a schematic data analysis of a wide set of curricular, bureaucratic, and legislative documents impacting Robeson. I also volunteered that year as a part-time classroom teacher offering two arts electives, an advisory course, and a spring yoga intersession (not to mention providing fifty-seven rides home). Afterward I conducted follow-up research trips in the fall of 2013, the spring of 2015, and the spring of 2016. Enumerated here, the sum of these discrete periods of data collection don’t add up to my psychic and political investment in The City, but I include the calculations here like scratch paper stapled to the back of an exam—just to show my work.

### When Winning Is Losing: The Structure of the Book

*Progressive Dystopia* examines seven concrete progressive “wins” in the context of Robeson Justice Academy and their relative cost to Black Frisco residents: the “Hands up, don’t shoot” mobilization of youth of color to protest police brutality, the defeat of a proposed surveillance program, the practice of antiracist pedagogy in a Spanish classroom, a cultural competence training to address racial disparities in discipline, the push out of authoritarian teachers, and a Black and Brown solidarity event in response to a racial brawl. Attention to successful reforms allows me to celebrate and name the material changes that *are* happening in the lives of Black children and children of color in Frisco. However, both the temporal catharsis of the “win” and the exhausting labor of service provision serve to domesticate our freedom dreams within the realm of what’s possible, rather than what’s necessary. The educators and staff at Robeson Justice Academy and at similar antiracist educational institutions across the US are doing the incredibly inspiring work of providing culturally competent, engaging, and democratically oriented direct service—they are winning because they are enacting the best-case scenario for surviving late liberalism. The chapters that follow sketch these scenarios and shadow the crew of malcontents who peep that the game was rigged from the jump.

In “‘A Long History of Seeing’: Historicizing the Progressive Dystopia,” I recount the attempted takeover of the governing council of Robeson Justice Academy by elite white gentrifiers, and the tension between Robeson’s social justice mission and state-mandated democratic bureaucracy. I describe San Francisco as a progressive dystopia, a perpetually colonial place that marks the frontier of both the national imagination and the late liberal project. As a lens into the political economy of San Francisco, I trace the history of racialized dispossession in the city from the massacre of indigenous Ohlone people, through the settlement and displacement of Asian American, Latinx, and Black communities. Using the frame of “militant liberalism” (Hanhardt 2013), I position Robeson as a key battlefield in the long fight between neoliberalism and progressivism in the revanchist city—the latter won this skirmish, but not without ceding territory to the New San Francisco.

In the third chapter, “‘Why Can’t We Learn African?’: Academic Pathways, Coalition Pedagogy, and the Demands of Abolition,” I use a Beginning Spanish classroom as a lens into the “progressive” side of the paradox of carceral progressivism. Across the US, austerity measures have dealt deadly blows to social services, particularly health care and education. In the midst of school closures in Black and Latinx neighborhoods and the aggressive rise of standardized tests as a coercive tool, Robeson’s social justice curriculum makes it an aberration in the state education system. By attending to the differential practice of form and content in Robeson’s classrooms, I conceptualize Robeson here as both a *strategy* and a *site* of struggle. To illuminate the former, I discuss the practice of coalition pedagogy, where instructors successfully use examples of multiracial coalition to combat what Christina Sharpe (2016) calls the “weather” of antiblackness. On the latter, I lift up moments where this sincerely antiracist curricular content is challenged by Black students who critique the scope of its impact, revealing the antagonism between antiracism and abolition.

Chapter 4, “The Kids in the Hall: Space and Governance in Frisco’s Plantation Futures,” centers on a staff meeting in which Robeson leadership tries to use critical race scholarship to help teachers manage student behavior. By attending to discourse among students and teachers about the hallways, I 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. Throughout the chapter, I draw on the work of Saidiya Hartman (1997) and Katherine McKittrick (2013) to trace the afterlife of slavery at Robeson as it manifests in the links between Recon-

struction-era approaches and reactions to the policing of Black comport and the management of hallway behavior in the school site. Finally, I follow the flight of the settled/slave toward what we might call a Frisco fugitivity, one that stays on the move within and away from the carceral city.

Can you get kicked out of a revolution? The fifth chapter, “Ordinary Departures: Flesh, Bodies, and Border Management at Robeson” ponders this query in relation to how Robeson manages dissent within the institution. During my fieldwork, two right-wing (read: liberal) nonblack teachers quit their teaching jobs, in part due to pressure from school leadership. Over the same period of time, several Black girls were asked to transfer out because of behavior concerns. I read institutional discourse around one such student, Tarika, which positions her as a “loud” troublemaker ill fitted for the school, to highlight the linkages between performances of social class, race, and obedience. Tarika is dismissed as a “Sunnydale girl” because she lives in a particular housing project, and I connect her expulsion from Robeson to the broader exclusion of Black girlhood from the boundaries of the citizen-human. While the win is clear—the problematic teachers left!—the wave of fanfare and farewells that attends departing teachers disorients those of us who might miss a Black girl like Tarika, whose normative absence renders her expulsion a nonevent.

The sixth chapter, “Black Skin, Brown Masks: Carceral Progressivism and the Co-optation of Xicanx Nationalism” centers on a racially charged brawl between Black and Latinx students, and subsequent community-based efforts toward reconciliation. I uncover the way policing and punishment form the foundation of the carceral progressivism that undergirds this iteration of multiracial coalition. First, I examine an impromptu mediation in the coprincipals’ office as a lens into the relationship between gender and race as primary markers of belonging. I then shift to a Town Hall meeting convened in response to the fight as a lens into the web of contradictory narratives that characterizes the terrain of left-of-center struggles in the Bay Area and beyond. In a cruelly parasitic move, the carceral progressive institution mobilizes Xicanismo as an antiblack state strategy, foreclosing both the liberatory impulse of Aztlán’s cultural nationalism and the institutional pledge of sanctuary for Black children in *The City by the Bay*. Ultimately, the exclusion of Black young people from the institutions founded to serve them belies the promise of state-funded progressivism in late liberal San Francisco.

The final chapter, “My Afterlife Got Afterlives,” is a sort of coda that examines the ways that this research project has been taken up by those

whose lives animate it. Returning to the photograph that opens the book, I recount a school leader's deployment of an early essay of mine as a strategy to thwart Black political mobilization at Robeson. In a sense, his use of the ethnographic text as part of his leadership practice is a huge success for critical anthropology—this is what we want, right? For folks to read and apply our work in the “real world?” However, his bad-faith citation practice reveals the risks of such engagement, and I juxtapose his use of the ethnographic text with a range of reactions from the participants who have read drafts of these chapters and responded with joy, doubt, and indifference. I examine how these recirculations of the work mirror the possibilities and limits of social movement work within the context of carceral progressivism, as well as the caveats embedded in the practice of anthropology of and as abolition.

At the 2014 convening of the Movement for Black Lives in Cleveland, there was an almost constant musical presence in the courtyards and on the street corners surrounding the conference events that attracted hundreds of Black organizers, educators, and cultural workers from across the US. Various chants and songs were shared across regions and generations, and each cipher culminated with this infectious refrain: “I believe that we will win! I believe that we will win!” sung at the top of our lungs as we jumped up and down or variously wiggled our body parts in rhythm with our faith in Black life. *I believe that we will win* is an abolitionist mantra that conjures a course to freedom. Its utterance is an affirmation of Black autonomy and in the context of a gathering that centered prison abolitionists and Black land activists, *I believe that we will win* is a ritual practice of internalizing the necessity to do the impossible. While the #OurLivesMatter photo that opens this chapter issues from the same impulse to preserve Black life, it redirects the rage of young people to the realm of the doable: arrest the officer, don't shoot unarmed civilians, protect Black and Brown youth from state execution. By focusing on the incremental rollout of revolutionary programing, the everyday practice of progressive reformers in places like Robeson Justice Academy is tethered to the temporality of success—*look at what we won*. *Progressive Dystopia* maps the tension between these two tenses of victory, and amplifies the lessons Frisco fugitives have for us as we dream an impossible world in which their lives do, in fact, matter.