

THE OCEAN IN THE SCHOOL: PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDENTS TRANSFORMING THEIR UNIVERSITY

by Rick Bonus

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To exist in the United States as one of the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) diaspora is to wrestle with questions of identity, whether the questions arise from within this pan-ethnic label, or from under the umbrella label “people of color,” or from the white gaze.¹ From the 1982 killing of Vincent Chin, which sparked the Asian American political identity, to stories today of harassment of Chinese and non-Chinese APIDA people because of misconceptions about the origins and causes of the coronavirus, we have too often been treated as if we are all the same, even though our histories and cultures are different (Stop AAPI Hate, 2020; Zia, 2000). Nowhere is this more prominent than the model minority myth, which obscures the reality that students of particular APIDA groups face challenges that others do not. As Museus and Kiang (2009) note, the pervasiveness of the model minority myth has led to invisible minorities within the context of race, diversity, and higher education research. While there is limited disaggregated data, census and other data show that while Asian adults have the highest level of educational attainment, Pacific Islanders (PI) and Native Americans have some of the lowest college enrollment rates in the country (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019).

Against this backdrop of perceived APIDA success in academic settings, Rick Bonus offers in *The Ocean in the School: Pacific Islander Students Transforming Their University* a compelling and disaggregated description of the lives and experiences of a group of Pacific Islanders at his home institution, the University of Washington, as they and their allies (Filipina/o Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, Southeast Asian Americans, and Chicanas/os/Latinas/os) sought to transform the university. Many of the PI students Bonus describes come from first-generation, immigrant, and/or low-income backgrounds. Drawing on a rich set of data from ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2004 to 2018, he shares the stories of those who both “succeed” and “fail” by traditional measures of academic achievement.

Throughout the book, Bonus uses the students’ metaphor of the ocean, which

historically and spatially linked students not only with the distant locations of their ancestors and communities; it reassuringly brought together mainland islanders in a sense of common history as it braided their present spaces and times of struggles with those who have struggled elsewhere and before them in intellectual, political, and spiritual contours. (p. 26)

He explains that this strategy of understanding the school as an ocean made students’ searching for knowledge more meaningful, while also necessitating “the imagination and practice of school as a site for generating and sustaining community” (p. 28). From a mentorship program (PIPE) to Polynesian

Heritage (Poly) Day, Bonus describes activities students engaged in that both raised awareness of PI students and their culture on campus while also supporting their needs both academically and holistically.

Bonus also takes great care in telling the stories of students who leave the university. In chapter 3 his framing can be understood as desire-centered, accounting for how PI students desire to be viewed, as opposed to a deficit-centered narrative that might impose outside standards for success (Tuck, 2009). He argues that students who voluntarily leave the university may leave because the institution failed them, not because they themselves were failures. Sonny and Marie, for instance, had succeeded academically until college, where their understandings of higher education as a place to explore different subjects and learn a variety of things was at odds with the vocational orientation of the university, with specific course requirements and expectations that often did not reflect PI students' histories and cultures. In this chapter Bonus describes the familial obligations and communal ties that pull PI students in different directions. Bonus also illustrates students' financial challenges, noting that these constraints were not only about a lack of money or resources but also about "not knowing where to get money, not knowing how to earn it when it was possible, and not being competent enough to know what to do with it when they were able to get hold of it" (p. 139). In contrast to typically deficit-centered narratives of university dropouts, Bonus positions these PI students as agents of their own learning, even as he describes the institutional and broader systemic challenges that they face.

Reading this book reminded me of my early experiences in higher education. When I was an undergraduate, my primary extracurricular activities revolved around the Vietnamese Students Association, housed within the Asian American Cultural Center. Having grown up around very few Vietnamese people, I was startled, and then amazed, to find a community that understood me and could help me navigate the unfamiliar waters of an elite institution. At the same time, there were (and continue to be) ongoing debates about the utility of ethnic affinity groups, as opposed to multicultural centers (Hefner, 2002). This book is a reminder of all the ways in which affinity groups can affirm and support students in new spaces. Throughout, Bonus, a Filipino American, persuasively argues against a monolithic understanding of diversity within higher education institutions by depicting PI students' specific experiences from a range of backgrounds and cultures and demonstrating the ways he and student allies from other ethnic groups are able to act in solidarity with them.

While the detailed stories of students are both evocative and provocative, the memory and usefulness of the ocean as a metaphor for the school becomes less certain in the second half of the book. The ocean is a vast, complex, and mercurial space, both physically and within our collective imagination. The ocean is beautiful but also dangerous. The ocean sustains but also destroys. Because the ocean itself can mean many things, the metaphor illumi-

nates many different examples of students' understandings of how to find and create meaningful learning experiences within their university, often while simultaneously building community. And yet, the more diffuse the metaphor becomes, the more its analytic power is lessened as a way of understanding the particulars of these students' experiences.

This book is a well-written depiction of a particular group of students within a particular institution, and the specificity of their stories provides a detailed glimpse into the ocean of the University of Washington over the last fifteen years. While based in a single school, the book is a worthwhile read for higher education administrators who are considering how to enact policies and programs that support marginalized students from a diverse range of backgrounds, as well as for educators and scholars who are considering questions of how to act in solidarity with students seeking to create meaningful learning experiences. The model minority myth tells only one version of the APIDA story. And while the stories of these students are the stories of Pacific Islanders, these are stories that will likely resonate with the stories of students from other parts of the APIDA diaspora, as well as the stories of other first-generation, immigrant, or other historically marginalized students of color. As readers, we can leave from a place of hope, in awe of all that Pacific Islander students have done when the odds were against them and with concrete suggestions for institutional policies that can validate their experiences and support them. While this particular institution may be an island within the ocean, the ocean touches on other schools, and so we may consider all of us to be complicit as well as capable of enacting change.

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Note

1. There are many terms to identify members of the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) community, such as AA, API, or AAPI. I elect to use the APIDA framing to intentionally signal the inclusion of Pacific Islanders and South Asians (Desi), while also noting that this term is still insufficient to highlight all historically marginalized groups within the pan-ethnic identifier.

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PROGRESSIVE DYSTOPIA: ABOLITION, ANTIBLACKNESS, AND SCHOOLING IN SAN FRANCISCO

by Savannah Shange

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How does anti-Blackness encroach on even the most progressive education reforms? This is the central question that frames Savannah Shange’s *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco*. By incisively analyzing the persistence of anti-Blackness in a social justice-oriented public high school in San Francisco, Shange pushes readers to consider the limits of progressive education reforms that remain tethered to the liberal state. By exploring the tensions between coalition building and anti-Blackness at the progressive boundaries of public education, Shange is able to surface the myriad ways in which late-liberal statecraft, or the administration of state power in the post-Fordist-Keynesianism global landscape, perpetuates Black exclusion even in ostensibly liberated spaces. Ultimately, Shange argues that Black liberation within an anti-Black state is an impossibility: Black freedom cannot be achieved in or through progressive organizations that remain tied to state projects of education reform. Rather, what is ultimately needed for Black lives to matter in schools (and society) is a “messy breakup with the state” (p. 4).

Progressive Dystopia draws on fieldwork as well as Shange’s prior work as a program coordinator, college counselor, and classroom teacher at Robeson Justice Academy, and her detailed ethnographic work is enhanced by her long-standing familiarity and relationships with the Robeson community. Shange pushes beyond the borders of Robeson Justice Academy, however, as she anchors her analysis in the racial political economy of San Francisco. In addition to an ethnographic study of coalition building at Robeson, Shange simultaneously positions her work as an ethnography of statecraft, or the set of state practices that permeate multiple institutions. For Shange, a critical anthropology of the state provides the theoretical and empirical leverage required to trace the ways state power maps onto “blackness as lived and loved on a daily basis” (p. 4).

Shange’s text is framed around three key themes: progressive dystopia, carceral progressivism, and willful defiance. She draws on the work of Octavia Butler to juxtapose utopian depictions of San Francisco as a hip, progressive city welcoming to innovative techies with the dystopic realities of displacement, anti-Black violence, and colonialism. This landscape is not limited to San Francisco, however. Shange positions San Francisco as one “coordinate in global