

Conversation

Book Review: *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*

Misha N. Inniss-Thompson is a doctoral student in Community Research and Action within the Department of Human and Organizational Development at Vanderbilt University. She is interested in using ecological systems theory and culturally relevant positive youth development models in understanding Black girls' experiences.

Book under review: Cox, Aimee Meredith. 2015. *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 296 pp.

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Shapeshifters is a masterfully written urban ethnography that explores how Black girls living in a Detroit homeless shelter navigate experiences of racism, poverty, and gender-based violence; how they talk back against stereotypes and controlling images; and how they highlight their right to citizenship. Aimee Meredith Cox, a cultural anthropologist and associate professor of Anthropology and African American Studies at Yale University, also has experience as a contributing editor for the website *The Feminist Wire* and for the Association of Black Anthropologists' journal *Transforming Anthropology*. Throughout *Shapeshifters*, Cox centers (1) "the theories and methods Black girls use to shift the shape of spaces" they occupy and (2) how "Black girls establish their own politics of the body" (26-27).

The text is based on eight years (2000-2008) of fieldwork that centered the lived experiences of residents of Fresh Start, a shelter program housed within Give Girls a Chance (GGC), which is a gender-focused, community-based social service organization in Southeast Detroit. Fresh Start aims to serve girls between fifteen and twenty-two years old by "provid[ing] support, training, and guidance" (21) as they try to secure housing and jobs that will enable them to transition out of homelessness. The book is divided into three parts with five chapters.

"Part One: Terrain" includes the introduction and the first chapter. In the introduction, the author highlights the dearth of knowledge about the experiences of Black girls and women, who have been sidelined in favour of understanding the plights that Black boys and men face. One of the author's many strengths is her keen attention to language. For example, in the introduction, Cox unpacks the meaning behind the title and centres

shapeshifting—how Black girls shift the spaces they occupy—and choreography—the process through which Black girls understand their social location(s) and its impact on how they are seen and appraised by others—as essential terms for understanding the book.

The first chapter provides readers with the opportunity to interrogate Detroit as the sociohistorical geographical context that has shaped the experiences of her participants. Detroit is positioned as a context in which Black women and girls simultaneously experience “bodily and geographic devaluation” (44). Cox aptly points out that Black women and girls have all of the “responsibilities of citizenship without the corresponding rights” (68). Readers learn about Janice, a third-generation Detroit girl from the Brown family, who actively critiques institutional spaces that fail “to educate and afford opportunities free of class- and gender-based exclusions” (74). Here, the reader sees that Janice has a sense of *entitlement* whereby she demands that institutions meet their requirements as she simultaneously rejects the expectations that she will shift her way of being in order to be properly serviced.

“Part Two: Scripts” illuminates the role of controlling images and expectations that are placed on Black women and girls. The second chapter describes the physical renovation of the GGC space that serves as a metaphor for the “renovation” the program hopes its participants will undergo. Camille, the program director of GGC, embodies the desire to propagate respectability politics rooted in norms of white femininity. This chapter problematizes common notions of success, which typically suggest that Black girls and women leave their hometowns and develop a sense of uncharacteristic individualism that is in opposition to the collective nature of the Black community. The third chapter emphasizes the role of self-authored narratives, storytelling, and performance as freeing practices for Black women and girls. While narratives can be liberating, they can also be a vehicle

for performing identities deemed acceptable by the larger society. In particular, Sharita’s story encourages the reader to understand that Black girls’ victimhood is often tokenized and a Black girl’s ability to transcend these experiences thus deems her worthy of attention. Importantly, Cox also addresses the ways in which Black women and girls learn to police their own bodies according to what broader society deems acceptable. The author connects this internal policing to our lost sense of freedom and youth, stating that some of us have “lost the ability to play, even if [we appear] to be mastering the game” (144). The author brilliantly connects respectability politics with the (in)visibility that Black women and girls face. Ultimately, Part Two is concerned with problematizing the scripts that have been imposed upon Black women and girls and using counter-narratives as a way to push back against these expectations.

“Part Three: Bodies” addresses the two-fold nature of performance, in terms of the “continual performance of self” and the “artistic expression aimed at a specific audience” (199). In the fourth chapter, Cox discusses sexual desire and gender performance. Readers learn about LaToya, a pregnant woman who expresses her sexual desires at an “open mic” night in a way that many render unacceptable behaviour. LaToya aptly rejects respectability politics and the societal expectation that people like her would tamper down expressions of sexual desire. Importantly, Cox continues to discuss internal policing that happens along gendered and class lines. For example, the author describes how Black women police each other, such as when LaToya’s friends evoked “maleness as a threat” (163) by suggesting that her boyfriend likely would not approve of her behaviour. LaToya provides an excellent example of the tension between trying to uplift Black women and girls in a way that rejects historical tropes of Black femininity, while also making space for open expression of sexual desire. Summer and Dominique’s experiences as masculine-presenting Black girls serve as a vehicle through which to explore gender performance. Throughout the ethnography, Cox alludes to characters who evoke

masculine-like qualities in order to get ahead, whether in the workplace or in personal interactions. Cox suggests that Summer and Dominique embody masculinity as a strategic mechanism that can provide them with the opportunity to reject the objectified and subjugated nature of Black femininity. The author brings to bear questions of (in)visibility, power, and performance as essential mechanisms for understanding Black girlhood.

The fifth chapter describes the process of artistic performance as a tool for Black women and girls to save themselves from the limiting tropes attributed to them and the sexual violence they face. Performance becomes a medium for the girls in Fresh Start to engage in a process of self-definition although, admittedly, performance is not a mechanism that can disrupt the systematic oppression that the girls at Fresh Start face. Nonetheless, it provides the participants with a way to command that spaces shift to accommodate them and encourages a form of self-love as “a practice essential to collective liberation” (232). Ultimately, the author posits that Black girls continuously (re)shape the institutional and social spaces they occupy by the very virtue of their presence.

Overall, Cox demonstrates a command of language as a symbolic tool. Her description of key terms such as *play*, *choreography*, *entitlement*, and *shapeshifting* push the reader to consider the multiple meanings of these words and the implications they have on Black women and girls. Additionally, academic literature about programming for “at-risk” youth of colour is often focused on changing the individual and void of attention to the impact of structural inequity (Clonan-Roy, Jacobs and Nakkula 2016). Cox does refreshingly well at attending to the notion that programming is inadequate in dealing with the larger issues plaguing Black girls and women. One shortcoming of the book, however, is Cox’s limited attention to her own positionality and its impact on her interactions with her participants. In choice sections, the author highlights how her position as a highly educated Black woman influenced her

interactions with both the GGC staff and participants. She also mentions that she had found herself perpetuating norms that she aimed to disrupt when interacting with the girls. Yet, more information about her experience with the project and her transition from volunteering for to directing the Fresh Start program would have been helpful to address and acknowledge the power dynamics that influenced her interactions with the participants.

Ultimately, *Shapeshifters* provides a much-needed look into the experiences of Black women and girls as they navigate structural inequity, controlling images, and a quest for self-authorship. This book is well-suited for a range of individuals interested in learning more about how Black girls navigate everyday life. In particular, “researchers, policymakers, educators, elected officials, creative artists, and Black girls themselves” (ix) may benefit most from reading *Shapeshifters*.

References

- Clonan-Roy, K., Jacobs, C. E., & Nakkula, M. J. (2016). “Towards a Model of Positive Youth Development Specific to Girls of Color: Perspectives on Development, Resilience, and Empowerment.” *Gender Issues*, 33: 96–121. doi: 10.1007/s12147-016-9156-7