



Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship

By Aimee Meredith Cox



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In *Shapeshifters* Aimee Meredith Cox explores how young Black women in a Detroit homeless shelter contest stereotypes, critique their status as partial citizens, and negotiate poverty, racism, and gender violence to create and imagine lives for themselves. Based on eight years of fieldwork at the Fresh Start shelter, Cox shows how the shelter's residents—who range in age from fifteen to twenty-two—employ strategic methods she characterizes as choreography to disrupt the social hierarchies and prescriptive narratives that work to marginalize them. Among these are dance and poetry, which residents learn in shelter workshops. These outlets for performance and self-expression, Cox shows, are key to the residents exercising their agency, while their creation of alternative family structures demands a rethinking of notions of care, protection, and love. Cox also uses these young women's experiences to tell larger stories: of Detroit's history, the Great Migration, deindustrialization, the politics of respectability, and the construction of Black girls and women as social problems. With *Shapeshifters* Cox gives a voice to young Black women who find creative and non-normative solutions to the problems that come with being young, Black, and female in America.

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Editorial Review

Review

"In this powerful book, Aimee Meredith Cox boldly re-conceptualizes the very meaning of 'public anthropology' in the twenty-first century. With vibrant, nuanced, and crackling ethnographic material, *Shapeshifters* offers a poignant telling of these women's stories."

(John L. Jackson, Jr., author of *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem*)

"In this powerful and passionate book Aimee Meredith Cox communicates important messages about the integrity and humanity of black girls, their potential, and the ways this potential is variously thwarted, squeezed, bounced, and redirected. Rich in detail and at times hilarious, painful, and revealing, Cox's ethnography provides an account of the ways girls move through the obstacle course of poverty, racism, and gender violence to create and imagine lives for themselves."

(Elizabeth Chin, author of *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*)

"Cox shows that "Black girls' lives matter" and how their voices articulate that. This ethnographic study of young black women and girls is an essential read and companion to the larger picture of African American lives in urban settings, which are often mired in poverty, crime, and despair. However, this rare study brings hope rather than hopelessness as it delves into the heart of human expression and gives voice to a will to live beyond any limitations of what poverty may dictate in contemporary North America."

(M. Christian *Choice Magazine*)

"This lively book, Cox's account of her work as a participant-observer in a Detroit homeless shelter for teen girls, reveals both the many obstacles faced by young women of color and the creative ways in which they use self-expression (language, music, fashion, and dance) to find a new way to live otherwise. The stories, harrowing and fascinating, shine a light on the lives of our least empowered citizens—teenage African American girls—while Cox's thinking helps us see the power of being able to shape-shift."

(Anne Fernald *Public Books* 2016-06-16)

"A creative and compelling ethnographic study, *Shapeshifters* challenges us to revise the ways we think, write, and theorize about young black women, starting with making their voices and self-analyses the subject of the book. Rather than analyzing the girls' narratives through the lens of academic theories, even those of black feminists, Cox asks that 'we open ourselves up to a conversation with them.'"

(Farah Jasmine Griffin *Public Books* 2016-11-01)

"*Shapeshifters* is an engaging, powerful read of the lived experience of young Black girls' lives that intersects with race, class, gender, and agency, providing a fresh perspective on citizenship, change, and standpoint."

(Olivia R. Hetzler *Gender & Society* 2016-02-11)

"While so much urban ethnography excludes women altogether, and black women in particular, *Shapeshifters* centers young black women, not simply as the subject of the book, but as authors of a world."

Shapeshifters proceeds from a position in which black life matters, where young women are sharp eyed critics and citizen-subjects all too aware of where their rights and responsibilities are limited or truncated, and further aware (and willing) to adopt the innovative tactics they need to surmount or work around said limitations."

(Sameena Mulla *Anthropoliteia* 2016-09-07)

About the Author

Aimee Meredith Cox is Assistant Professor of African and African American Studies at Fordham University.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Carl Moss:

The book *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* give you a sense of feeling enjoy for your spare time. You may use to make your capable considerably more increase. Book can for being your best friend when you getting anxiety or having big problem using your subject. If you can make looking at a book *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* being your habit, you can get much more advantages, like add your capable, increase your knowledge about some or all subjects. It is possible to know everything if you like open and read a e-book *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. Kinds of book are several. It means that, science publication or encyclopedia or other individuals. So , how do you think about this book?

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Philip Kirkpatrick:

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