

Review Essay

Post-Ferguson Service-Learning: Black Girlhood Matters

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Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship

Aimee Meredith Cox

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The August 9, 2014 fatal police shooting of unarmed Black eighteen year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri spawned an embodied movement focused largely among Millennial Black Americans. The Ferguson moment that became the movement was conceived in 2012 by three queer Black women as the hashtag, Black Lives Matter (BLM). Alicia Garza, one of the founders, recounts that they developed the hashtag out of their frustration and anger following the jury acquittal of the killer of seventeen year-old Trayvon Martin by a self-proclaimed citizen-protector who had perceived Martin to be a threat to his neighborhood (Garza, 2014). After the Ferguson moment, young Blacks, along with differing degrees of involvement from other racial and ethnic allies, grasped the collective power of citizenship for themselves. In the shift from hashtag to movement, images of the Black dead at the hands of sworn officers of the law were overwhelmingly male. As the death toll mounted, it gave the appearance that it is primarily the lives of Black men and boys that have most prominently mattered, although Black women and girls have also been snatched from this life when they, too, have been deemed threatening – sometimes merely by attitude and word in the name of claiming the right of liberative free speech. Regardless of how it may otherwise be interpreted, the BLM Movement carries the hallmarks of civic engagement. Given the urban service spaces shared by peer educators and community partners, the BLM cultural impact presents opportunity and challenge to community service learning (CSL) educators to develop what Sheffield (2011) refers to as “strong” CSL in which campus-based service-learners move beyond the self-transformative lessons of effective albeit “weaker” versions of CSL to participating

with members of the target community to deconstruct the structures of their oppression in order to transform communities.

Civil protest undergirded by BLM sentiment and coupled with attention from mainstream media outlets has made more (especially White) Americans aware of the inequitable and aggressive treatment that Black boys and men have long experienced at the hands of the justice system. And although the protests did not eradicate the characterization of Black maleness as universally menacing and violent, the movement created space for alternative cultural and societal readings of the bodies of Black boys and young men. One example of visual display was the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign that originated on social media and was then redistributed and discussed through mainstream media outlets. Black Millennials, often males, posted side-by-side images of themselves draped in the garb of their intersectional situatedness.¹ In one slide, they might be dressed as a university or medical student on graduation day next to a photo of themselves in the casual attire of a “homeboy” at a party. These different photos of the same person demonstrate the effectiveness of media images in shaping the perception of young Black men. Image posters understood that to sustain the negative narrative of Black males, the media would choose to distribute their “homeboy” photo rather than their graduation photo. They also understood that they were creating their own digital footprint, while at the same time proclaiming that neither set of clothing could automatically allow them to escape the experience of harassment by a justice system they see as more interested in policing than protecting and serving them. Regardless of attire, culturally, we have been taught to read Black male bodies to

suggest imminent threat. In *Shapeshifters*, Aimee Meredith Cox observes that although this singular cultural reading of Black male bodies is more than a little problematic, there *is* a societal and cultural language to talk about boys and young Black men, but that Black girls and young women are “illegible” (p. vii).

Cox wants to make Black girls and young women “legible” (pp. vii, 147-148). She wants readers of her text to learn to “read” Black girls and young women beyond the elementary narratives with which they are familiar such as in hypersexuality. Before the lives of Black girls and young women can be known, they must first be seen, be made socially and culturally visible. By clearing multidisciplinary theoretical ground, Cox makes Black girlhood studies visible to the academy. Black girls are subjects and existential entities unto themselves, not Black versions of the more often seen White girls whose cares and concerns normalize what it is like to be female. Furthermore, Cox chooses to do so without suggesting that the attention given to Black males such as Michael Brown or other unarmed Black males killed in officer-involved shootings is inappropriate or that the attention should be diminished. Neither is it her aim to “romanticize [Black girls] to counter negative representations. Black girls are not the problem. Their lives do not need sanitizing, normalizing, rectifying, or translating so they can be deemed worthy of care and serious consideration” (p. 8). Black girls’ lives are worthy of study, and their lives matter for the theoretical knowledge that they produce. Black girls and young women matter – to themselves, but also to their families, to their communities – including Detroit – as representative of urban life across the nation.

Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship joins seven other texts published since 2014 in the emerging field of urban and third world black girlhood studies. Without replication, this scholarship follows a pattern similar to that of the late 1970s and early 1980s Womanists who saw that Black women’s concerns could support their own social and theological critique differentiated from both White women’s focus on patriarchy and Black men’s fight against racism. Cox’s approach addresses particularity to which Driscoll nods in her essay, “Girls Today,” published in the 2008 inaugural issue of the peer-reviewed journal, *Girlhood Studies*. Driscoll examined literature written for a variety of purposes and provided a retrospective analysis of categories that she saw as delineating contemporary girlhood studies; the field had evolved from the innocence of interests in girls’ leisure activities and “tween” life. The girls

and young women Cox introduces sometimes have burdens more serious than those of most adults yet they still imagine “girl talk” and hope for a “girl world” (Driscoll, pp. 25, 27).

In her ethnography, Cox builds a non-comparative, self-contained theory of Black girlhood from the precarious, quotidian existence of Black girls and young women. Between 2000 and 2008 she served as a volunteer and staff member at the pseudonymic Fresh Start homeless shelter and other programs of the similarly fictionally-named Give Girls a Chance (GGC) social service agency located in Southwest Detroit. She used her unprecedented access to the residents and staff to conduct her fieldwork. Cox shows how power and social systems both confine and exclude Black girls and young women from the fullness of citizenship. In her text, Black females, primarily teenagers and early twenty-somethings, work out the details and issues of their lives, including race, gender, and sexual identity development and the appropriation and performance of the same. In using this fresh material, Cox seeks to modernize the understanding of the sexual threat under which too many Black girls and young women constantly live, placing them at risk even when they thwart or slip away from the immediate peril; more than half of Black girls are estimated to have been sexually abused before the age of eighteen. Often, this Black girlhood is told through its historical roots of the sexual abuse of Black girls and women during American enslavement and the Jim Crow era; this historical narrative is vital to understanding why Black females continue to be read as hypersexual objects rather than engaged as empowered subjects.² Cox’s modernization demonstrates that the experience is not only a historical marker on the bodies of Black girls and young women.

Shapeshifters is arranged in three parts with five chapters. In Part One, Cox sets out the scope of the text through the theoretical literature and the social context of the Black-gendered experience in the urban North. Set in Detroit, the city’s history as a twentieth century geographic siren song to workers in the U.S. and the world, is a continuously-present background. The city as a backdrop gives Cox a unique opportunity to demonstrate how the post-industrial, disinvested urban experience plays a substantive part in economic imprisonment and political disempowerment even when the person herself is not impoverished. And the reader who is familiar with this context understands that as difficult as is the economic ecology described, the city’s 2013 municipal bankruptcy falls outside the period of Cox’s field work; it is yet to come. Part Two of the text marks out the established, external

views of Black girls and young women, especially as drawn through the dominant gaze of American society and the socio-political terrain of protest, resistance to dominant structures, and the presumed or narrative limitations of citizenry placed on the lives of Black girls and young women. Finally, in Part Three, she allows the young women to demonstrate their growth and development, to put on full, embodied display how they have come to better understand themselves, some as mothers, and all as striving, interdependent, or independent young women ready to claim their citizenship and educate their communities about the needs of Black girls and young women. This outline brings Cox's subjects into sight allowing them to become legible. The scope of this content sets the stage for service-learning educators to design what Sheffield (2011) refers to as *strong community service learning*, the description of which I will return to below.

In the first chapter of *Shapeshifters*, the author introduces three generations of the Brown family, headed by grandmother, Bessie, who is a late Great Migration transplant to Detroit from Alabama. Bessie's 1964 arrival near the end of the second wave of the largest in-country movement of U.S. citizens is pivotal. Historians mark 1970 as the end of this great population shift from the rural South to urban centers of the U.S. South, North, and West. The latter generations of the family meet with economic struggle rather than success. Sugrue (2014) notes that automobile manufacturers began to relocate auto assembly plants from the city of Detroit to its suburbs and to smaller cities in the Midwest in the late 1950s, so unbeknownst to the later migrants, the deindustrialization of the city had already begun and the increased use of automation was reducing the number of workers needed. Instead of access to the well-paying, albeit low-skilled jobs available to Bessie's twin brothers who had arrived in Detroit years earlier, Bessie found work in the city's kitchens serving customers and cleaning restaurants and clubs.³ Like her brothers, Bessie had not completed high school. And just a few years after her arrival, the teen-aged single mother was the family's primary breadwinner taking care of her mother, Mary, and her own growing family. Her brothers had been blues performers back home and intermittently continued performing in Black Detroit's Paradise Valley entertainment district, but Bessie had little expectation that they would contribute to the family. Neither did she anticipate on-going assistance from the fathers of her six children. In revealing Bessie's expectations, Cox demonstrates the gendered experience of caretaking as a restriction of agency often attached to being female. Being born female limits the construction and pursuit of dreams; Bessie ac-

cepts it as the normal flow of life. The reader can easily imagine the blank stare that she has at Cox's questions about whether Bessie herself had ever entertained dreams such as those that allowed her brothers to pursue the limelight of the stage. But Bessie's granddaughters and other GGC program participants, especially as represented through the words and eyes of Janice, feel entitled to pursue a life as *they* envision it for themselves, rather than as does the dominant society, the staid Black girlhood narratives, and the social services adults assigned to mold the young women to fit within the dominant vision. Cox writes,

Janice and her peers point to the ways that creative self-making, or shapeshifting, can be reclaimed by Black girls and women through the exercise of critical entitlement. A sense of entitlement exhibited by Black girls is one that explicitly acknowledges the intrinsic value of all human life and the right to be protected and cared for. (p. 67)

The text is most successful when Cox allows the young women to speak for themselves as they increasingly do through the vignettes she presents in chapters two through five. Therein the reader gains a sense of their desires; their individual and collective agency; how they strive through setbacks, failures, disappointments, and recriminations; and their occasional, hard-fought accomplishments. The events in the lives of these young women sometimes leave them speechless, and when that happens, Cox's coaching dialogue helps them locate sufficient words to unveil the depth of the young women's hurt, fear, anger, and frustration in the face of what I describe as a lack of *protectedness* – not protection, *protectedness* – the lack of protection without or with minimal cultural expectation of it. The barriers that befall these young women are systemic, familial, and sometimes personal. The reader sees the details of what it means to have no capital resources, few or no family to count on or other social support resources, only to be able to hope that another shelter resident will be available to provide child care and to be grateful that the shelter can provide transportation at the end of her work shift so she will not have to wait at night on the horribly unreliable Detroit bus system and possibly fall prey as a victim of crime. Race and class explain much of the lack of protectedness. Gender is inherent in the subject matter, but Cox documents how to read the social landscape in order to see that, comparatively (again, comparison is not Cox's primary approach), young White girls do not suffer the effects of gender discrimination in exactly the same way. Being Black and female

is not just different in degree; it is different in kind. Two vignettes illustrate the point.

We meet the striving, seventeen year-old Sharita.⁴ She became a resident of the shelter after her family's apartment caught fire. Sharita's family consists of her mother and three brothers – five year-old twins and a brother who is five years older than she. When fire destroys their home, the family turns to a relative for shelter: a single mother with two young daughters. Under these crowded living conditions – two adult women, four young children, an early twenty-something male, and seventeen year-old Sharita – Sharita's mother reasons that a female who is young and attractive will have an easier time locating other housing than anyone else in the family; therefore, Sharita must go. As a shelter resident, we see Sharita's youthful attractiveness and articulation skills put to good use; she is called upon as an exemplar of the ideals of GGC's transitional housing uplift programming as well as a representative of the altruistic intentions of the agency's donors. Seen as well-spoken, Sharita's rising from the ashes of homelessness to be admitted to Michigan State University makes for a great, feel-good story. For a time, Sharita becomes a high-profile, resident spokesperson touting the opportunities for her and evidence of the return on donor investment dollars. But Sharita never gets to exploit her determination or her youthful attractiveness for her self-willed benefit. She and Cox unexpectedly cross paths when Cox is a customer paying for her fast food meal in a restaurant drive-through. Cox and Sharita arrange to meet, and Cox engages with her in an informal interview. Cox learns that Sharita had not been able to enroll at Michigan State; the young woman found out that she needed to pay a portion of the tuition – a sum she did have – and (once again), she did not have housing when she arrived in East Lansing to begin what should have been her first semester at college. Sharita's social service agency caseworker had known of her circumstances, and the executive director had been made aware, but no one had followed through with solutions, so Sharita was left to locate her own solutions. Leaving in an idealized celebratory send-off riding in the Fresh Start-paid cab, Sharita directs the taxi driver to take her to another shelter; without tuition and housing she cannot begin college. Sharita turns to what is most available in this urban economic ecology, fast food jobs and, at different times, a boyfriend who may or may not be a part of the drug trade. Throughout this vignette, Cox leaves room for the inevitable judgment that readers will heap onto Sharita's mother for her decision. However, to stop to exercise such a narrow judgment is to miss the point entirely. Shar-

ita's story helps to demonstrate the theoretical work of Wanzo (2009) in which a Black woman must be a certain type of sympathetic character to stir the concerns of the dominant media and “populace and [to] produce institutional effects” (as cited in Cox, p. 147).

Narratives that involve a transformation from tragedy or degradation to uplift allow Black women to become legible in the larger society and, possibly, to be considered subjects worthy of sympathy and concern. Sentimental political storytelling [the theoretical name] . . . eliminates the larger social and historical context so that the individual is charged with her own transformation. (Cox, pp. 147-148)

The second sample vignette did not occur in her field experience, but it demonstrates one of the fine examples of Cox's attention to the vast theoretical literature needed to develop her argument about the fundamentally different examination of the lives of Black girls and women. Here, Cox presents the 2002 kidnapping and escape episode of seven year-old Erica Pratt. Erica becomes the heroine of the news stories about her. Taken from her family's yard and confined to the basement of an abandoned building, over the course of that night and part of the next day Erica chews through the duct tape that bound her wrists, made her way up stairs, kicked through a wooden panel, and punched through a glass window. Two young boys playing outside heard Erica's yells for help, notified adults, and set up her rescue. In one of the few times in her text that Cox comes close to making a racial comparison, she introduces that the media had also covered the kidnapping of three young white girls in 2002. In those stories, the author illustrates the differing expectations of protection. All of the girls had been kidnapped from their homes. Two of the white girls, Danielle Van Dam and Elizabeth Smart, were taken from their bedrooms; the third, Samantha Runion was taken from her yard, like Erica. The youngest girls, Danielle and Samantha, 7 and 5, respectfully, were sexually assaulted and murdered, their bodies found later. Elizabeth Smart, older at 14, was eventually located. The author wants her readers to understand a number of issues about how they are taught to “read” these crimes against girls that distinguish the public response to kidnapped White girls versus the kidnapped Erica.

For one, Cox observes, abductions of Black girls and young women often go unnoticed by the media. When there are media reports, a “limited social lexicon . . . makes violence against Black girls and young women legible to the broad public. Erica's kidnapping can be recounted as part of the story of

drug- and gang-related kidnappings in an embattled neighborhood in Southwest (Black) Philadelphia” (p. 193). Contemporaneous reporting suggested that such crimes did not occur in the types of communities in which the White girls lived. On the other hand, according to Cox appealing to theory from Coatney (2002), Black children “are expected to defend and care for themselves, while the lack of protection and the various incarnations of violence they face are normalized” (p. 193). Erica survived because at seven years old, she had learned her lesson well; she behaved as would be expected by a Black girl like herself: She was “resilient, determined to fight for herself, and demonstrated a unique pragmatism that belies her years” (p. 193). And for it, the media credited her quick thinking and her physical strength; they aired her story in part because it supports the cultural narrative. Erica’s ability to take extraordinary measures to save herself is entirely different from the cultural expectation for her White peers. The expected norm for White children is that, quite simply, they have protection and never face such a dilemma.

Shapeshifters allows readers to see the world through the eyes and experiences of Black girls and young women. In it, Cox successfully opens the intellectual space that augments the “societal and cultural language [we already use] to talk about boys and young Black men” (p. vii) so that we can begin to develop more language to talk about Black girls and young women.

In the service-learning context, Cox’s work is best put to use as content resource. Yet its use need not be limited to the population at-hand. The problems she identifies are also often – but not always – a factor of poverty, so the text teaches students about the interconnectedness of Black girls and young women with children and/or older adults for whom they may provide caretaking as well as the needs of middle class unmarried women who, for diverse reasons including mass incarceration and lower Black male life expectancy, may live for long periods without a partner often as caretakers. The quality of life for these heads of household-caretakers is further diminished by the low wages that too many Black women earn. Using U.S. Census data, the National Partnership for Women and Families (2015) reports that average earnings for Black women measures only sixty percent of earnings for men (substantially less than the oft-quoted seventy-nine cents to the dollar earned by White women), a figure that highlights the disproportionate poverty of these families, and an environment of striving to survive rather than to thrive. We saw this striving to survive in Sharita’s vignette. Poverty is more than the lack of financial resources; it is lack

of access to think and plan beyond the short-term, not the lack of the capacity to do so. Dreams must be put on hold or put to death. But recall: Cox has not written her text to display Black girlhood as a victimized class; she has written it as a factual account of what they live with in order to develop a picture of how they see their own lives in spite of how the world around them sees (or more accurately fails to see) them, and how they address their will to live fully, regardless. Now that these young women are visible, we can now return to service-learning, including Sheffield’s model.

Chesler and Vasquez Scalera (2000) remind us that the combination of service-learning, race, and gender provides challenging yet “potentially powerful learning experiences” (p. 19). Coles (1999) integrated a race focus in her sociology courses and found that White students who were largely from the suburbs and small towns most often participated in the service-learning option. Chesler and Vasquez Scalera noted that a race and gender focus in a service-learning setting is intended to teach participating students about identities and communities – their own or those of persons in communities where they engage “and/or as part of efforts to challenge and transform racist and sexist aspects of community life and community agencies/institutions” (p. 18). Coles acknowledged students’ discomfort in these cross-cultural exchanges. She also provided several pedagogical strategies including orientation discussions and substantive reflection. Coles suggests that community members may “express . . . resentment at being the object of study and observation or at being perceived as only a receiver of services” (p. 101). All of these factors are important to consider in what I am terming the post-Ferguson era. On the point of “resentment,” an updated interpretation is to anticipate an unyielding determination for community members to set their own agenda, tactics, and priorities. *Shapeshifters* offers service-learning students an excellent content preview of race, gender, and class before they enter an urban community site. Coupled with Sheffield’s (2011) model of “strong CSL,” it can awaken students’ community engagement imaginary beyond the still critical but weaker versions of CSL experiences described above by Coles and Chesler and Vasquez Scalera. To Sheffield, it is insufficient for students to learn about themselves; he thinks CSL is made even better when the experiences help to transform communities.

In his text, *Strong Community Service Learning: Philosophical Perspectives*, Sheffield (2011) seeks to address a frequent criticism of CSL that it is insufficiently conceptualized (p. 1). He combines community service pedagogy with philosophical

grounding in Dewey's pragmatism while acknowledging that current research in the field observes the use of social theories such as critical theory, hegemony, and social justice with an aim to diversity; together, these theoretical approaches bolster the practice of CSL. The social justice component of the learning comes alive as an outward expression of the inward reflection that is often standard practice in the service-learning pedagogy. As Sheffield envisions this version of CSL, students unite their inner democratic transformation with communities' understanding of their needs (pp. 145-148). Sheffield is wise to halt the criticism by some educators who may view the social justice link as a form of "political indoctrination" (p. 146). Rather, using the work of Heybach (2009) who references Greene (1977), Sheffield asserts that

it is . . . concerned with the self-reconstructive process that comes in understanding one's 'situatedness' relative to self and community . . . So conceived, social justice is reflective of community, service, and reflective learning . . . In that way, social justice and CSL with a social-justice aim, is a deeply democratic mode of being, rather than an orientation based on political dogma. (pp. 146-147)

Students' experiences with diverse communities move beyond self-reflection and self-reconstruction to become useful to those communities with whom they are now partners.

Incorporating Sheffield's language, I began this essay by arguing that in the post-Ferguson era, communities demand to be engaged in appropriating their citizenship according to their understanding of self, situatedness, and the collective self-determined needs of their communities. This stance challenges service-learning project designs to include more pre-engagement preparation to be able to see *and* hear community partners with greater levels of complexity. It suggests that service-learning projects be designed to share in the work of the democratic activity which will be needed to change the systems that inhibit the progress of striving community partners. Campus-based learners are regularly called upon to continuously develop writing skills and to collect data through research and communicate findings, especially through visual and digital means. These are invaluable resources to communities where residents spend more of their time striving to survive than striving to garner the democratic power to which they believe they are entitled. Recall the sense of entitlement described above and anticipated by Janice in *Shapeshifters*.

I highly recommend this book. Its topic is im-

portant and Cox's non-comparative approach to her task is made more apparent by acknowledging that comparative language frameworks are the more efficient means to which we are accustomed in this discourse; Cox overcomes this flawed, norm-replicating rhetoric. Black girls and young women too often continue to be seen in reference to Black males and White females. An admonition: In spite of this recommendation, the text often drags. The author's writing captures the considerable description made necessary by the new ground that she is breaking. In such, Cox seeks to overlook stereotypes. Yet in the placement of these descriptions it is sometimes pages or several vignettes before she reveals the explanatory relevance of the description for Black girlhood theory. These displacements leave the reader with anticipatory questions until Cox's interpretation of the girls' experiences emerges. This is not inherently problematic, except that the author is carving out new intellectual space at the same time that she is teaching the legibility of Black girls and young women's lives. It takes a motivated reader to push through for the valuable theoretical stance in this substantive work regardless of how many pages or vignettes it takes to reach it. She will deliver; it requires patience. To be sure, this is not Cox's problem alone. I read her text as a post-Ferguson primer on Black girlhood. (Most likely, the timelines of the publishing process would not have allowed her to observe her text through this post-Ferguson lens.) *Shapeshifters*, with its self-determining stance, helps to illuminate the emergence of gendered hashtags beyond #BlackLives-Matter. Arguably, the most well-known of these is "#SayHerName" coined by the African American Policy Forum; it gives attention to the fact that there have also been police-involved brutality and killings of Black girls and young women (African American Policy Forum, n.d.).⁵ Despite the caveat, the vignettes give college students ample reflective material to better understand this population from the interior life of these young women. Designing the service-learning experience using Sheffield's strong CSL will not only disrupt narratives, it will prepare students to participate in the needed radical improvements of the neglected urban landscapes of the twenty-first century in which they will share rather than avoid or gentrify space. Seeing and knowing all the potential partners takes time, commitment, and incremental structural change; revolutionary democratic citizenship always does.

Notes

¹ Bill Chappell, “People Wonder: ‘If They Gunned Me Down,’ What Photo Would Media Use?” NPR.org August 11, 2014.

² Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative, one of the few from a Black American woman, is an excellent source for the depiction of the day-to-day sexual threat in enslavement. H. Jacobs (2001). *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. New York: Dover Publications. Originally published Boston, 1861.

³ As was Bessie’s experience, the greatest proportion of Black women worked in service jobs. See Sugrue, 2014, p. 278.

⁴ Cox notes that she uses pseudonyms for the young women in her narratives.

⁵ According to their website, the African American Policy Forum was founded in 1996 with the mission to seek intersectional social justice. They have also coined hashtags #BlackGirlsMatter and #WhyWeCantWait. I learned of the former hashtag after I had subtitled this essay.

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