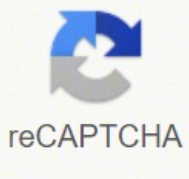




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There are more beautiful things than beyoncé review

Poetry is language operating at its highest purpose, called through compression and complexity of image to function on an aesthetic level while communicating meaning. What better art form than poetry, then, for Morgan Parker to use in her new book, *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*? The book is a tribute to Black American womanhood, an ode to the joys and sorrows and triumphs of being Black and female in this sick, lovely, dangerous world—and every word inside is beautiful, even when they hit you hard like a punch in the chest or make you want to cry. As Parker demonstrates, beauty is not always simple or even pleasurable—sometimes it’s contradictory and confusing. She tells us, “I am a tree and some fruits are good and some are bad.” Throughout the collection, Parker is in conversation with contemporary pop culture, especially her primary muse, Beyoncé. Beyoncé’s presence is felt throughout—as inspiration, as guide, as an avatar for Parker’s meditations on what it means to be a Black woman today. Readers looking for lighthearted adulation of Beyoncé may be disappointed—although Parker clearly admires Beyoncé, these are not praise poems; instead, they bend the image of Beyoncé to Parker’s purposes and reflect her own personal struggles and preoccupations. At her book launch at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Parker explained Beyoncé’s role in the book by asking, “What do we actually know about Beyoncé, aside from her music?” The answer was “not much,” and that’s why Parker chose her “as a vessel.” In Parker’s poems, even Beyoncé is misunderstood, mistaken, unable to meet the unfair and demanding expectations of the public. “I mouth Free and Home into a crowd/ but they only hear gold extensions,” we are told in “Beyoncé Is Sorry for What She Won’t Feel.” Later, in the book’s shortest poem, “What Beyoncé Won’t Say on a Shrink’s Couch,” she says, “what if I said I’m tired/ and they heard wrong/ said sing it.” The poems contain a wide range of pop culture references, which Parker seamlessly melds with racial politics. “I’m a moodless seedling/ on the day Jay Z was born/ & Fred Hampton was killed,” she tells us. That day was December 4, 1969, when Hampton, a leader in the Black Panther Party, was murdered in his bed by Chicago police as part of the FBI’s strategic and concerted effort to stamp out the Black liberation movement. In “The Gospel According To Her,” 13 lines invoke the 13 stripes on an American flag: Seven explore a slave’s relationship with the United States, and six question that of a woman, artfully demonstrating the intersecting and sometimes conflicting identities and tensions that Black women in America must navigate. In “Take a Walk on the Wild Side,” she subverts the final lyrics of Lou Reed’s famous song with the lines “Please let me/ And the colored girls go.” The book is also, as Parker explained, “an archive of the Obama era...a time of looking around and seeing Black people owning everything and getting no support.” She told the crowd at the book launch that she hadn’t realized this until recently: she wrote these poems over the past five years, and she sees them now as depicting a particular moment in time, “a time we were all lucky to live through.” She does engage with Obama’s legacy critically in the book, in the poem “The President Has Never Said the Word Black,” saying “The President be like/ we lost a young boy today.” Although Parker’s criticisms of Obama may not land as well now that we’re faced with such a deeply inadequate and morally reprehensible president in Trump, they’re a necessary part of the complex vision of Blackness she presents. Criticisms of Obama can coexist with an understanding that Trump is a far worse leader—we need not present an oversimplified vision of our values and expectations, or erase the history of where Democratic leadership has fallen short, in order to resist the current administration. The title of the book is literal: Parker wants to let the world know that Beyoncé is not the only beautiful example of Black womanhood. She highlights and names the myriad forms of Black female beauty that are ignored and forgotten every day in the white supremacist patriarchy we live in. There are poems dedicated to Carrie Mae Weems, Michelle Obama, and Hottentot Venus as well as to the everyday forms of beauty we encounter in our regular lives. In the title poem, “Please Wait (Or, There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé),” she says, “This is for all the grown women out there/ Whose countries hate them and their brothers.” Another poem, “Let Me Handle My Business, Damn,” is an anthem, seething with anger, pride, and righteous dignity. “Took me awhile to learn the good words...I’m a patch of grass the stringy roots/ you call home or sister if you want/ I could scratch your eyes make hip-hop die again.” These words, brilliant, lovely, and sharp like a diamond, cut me deeply and left me in awe of Parker’s writing. This book is an exciting contribution to the rich legacy of Black feminist art, literature, poetry, and music that daily adds more complex representations of Black American womanhood, which mainstream society is severely lacking. This is a collection in which the whole is greater than its parts, which is not to say the parts don’t consist of superb poems, because they do. But like Lemonade, this is a conceptual work so is best appreciated in its entirety.To convey a sense of Morgan Powers, these are her group Acknowledgments at the end: I bow to my muses: John Coltrane, Carrie Mae Weems, Billie Holiday, Nelly, Drake, Peanut Butter Wolf, W. B. Yeats, Fania All Stars, Digable Planets, Lou Reed, Miles Davis, Barack and Mich This is a collection in which the whole is greater than its parts, which is not to say the parts don’t consist of superb poems, because they do. But like Lemonade, this is a conceptual work so is best appreciated in its entirety.To convey a sense of Morgan Powers, these are her group Acknowledgments at the end: I bow to my muses: John Coltrane, Carrie Mae Weems, Billie Holiday, Nelly, Drake, Peanut Butter Wolf, W. B. Yeats, Fania All Stars, Digable Planets, Lou Reed, Miles Davis, Barack and Michelle Obama, Jay Z, and of course, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter.In an interview with Mother Jones (2/15/17) Parker was asked the meaning of the title and responded:That’s a question I could spend about 30 minutes answering. I also don’t want to narrow down the interpretation for readers—there are so many ways to read the sentence, and all of them are applicable. I guess the only thing I’d say is it shouldn’t be read as “Beyoncé is not beautiful.”Titles include Slouching Toward Beyonce, 13 Ways of Looking at a Black Girl, It’s Getting Hot in Here So Take Off All Your Clothes, Ain’t Misbehaving and Beyonce Celebrates Black History Month. There’s range within the collection and often within a single poem: she frequently precedes or follows a playful line with one that’s piercing. Earlier in the Mother Jones interview she said, I remember thinking, these poems are going to be really irrelevant in a year. Not so. Oh no.excerpts from 99 Problems:4. They made me the wild creek between Class Clown & Most Unique33-35. Fucked a white boy 36-42. American History 43. Where are you from? 44. Prozac Weight58. OKCupid59. White Saviors60. Karaoke 61. Limited cocktail shrimps 62-70. Please check all that apply: panic attacks hopelessness decreased socialization guilt general overwhelming stress suicide attempts71. Are you OK? 72 Tyler Perry 73. Hangovers76. James Franco94, Teacher called me Sheila 95. Sheila was the other Black girl 96. Sheila hated me 97. What we mean by “come up” 98. Be strong 99. I’m tired ...more There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé Poems by Morgan Parker Tin House Books, February 2017 \$14.95; 80 pp. ISBN-13: 978-194104053-9 One way (of many) to describe how good poetry operates is to say that it reorganizes reality in some pleasurable or bracing manner. In concert with a reader, it enacts a spacious, flexible, indeterminate vocabulary for paying more attention to the world, for italicizing human and natural events, for vocalizing selfhood. It offers new visions of old spaces. There is a long humanist tradition of saying this, but it bears repeating under market capitalism. Moreover, it suits Morgan Parker’s new collection of poetry, *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*, very well. For an American poet who wants to write honestly, this reorganization entails uneasy questions about race, gender, and sexual identity; in particular, who gets to describe them, and how. This would be true of any era, but in the shadow of Donald Trump these questions are especially grave. Parker, who completed her graduate work at NYU and now lives in Brooklyn, is young, African American, and a woman. Identity alone would not necessarily make her a keen observer, of course, but fed into the kind of lyric arsenal she has, lived experience makes for a vivid, nimble mode of poetic cultural critique, one that encompasses far more than the poet’s single self. Beyoncé Knowles, as you might guess, hovers over the volume like a demiurge or guiding mythos. She appears in various guises and moods, different situations and positions, never quite the star we think we know from her public appearances. In one poem there is even a white Beyoncé. Behind it all is the suspicion that Knowles, like us, is hurting and vulnerable, and that this produces both art and alienation. As the speaker of “What Beyoncé Won’t Say on a Shrink’s Couch” asks, “what if I said I’m tired / and they heard wrong / said sing it”? Dominant though her presence is, Beyoncé takes her place amid a larger network of famous African Americans: Audre Lorde, Tina Turner, Jay Z, Nina Simone, Michelle Obama, Fred Hampton, Billie Holiday, and Amiri Baraka, among many others. In turn, the constant scrutiny under which the famous labor mirrors the broader surveillance of black bodies across the United States. This racialized economy involves great material violence (witness the disproportionate killing of black citizens by police or the obscene reality of America’s prison system) but also conceptual and imaginative distortion by discourses of politics, economics, ethics, medicine, and historiography. (In “All They Want is My Money My Pussy My Blood,” “They ask me about slavery. They say Martin Luther King. / At school they learned that Black people happened.”) Such erasure can be enabled by literature, too. Think of how little Jim gets to talk in Huckleberry Finn; think Kipling’s “white man’s burden”; think about how Saul Bellow’s later fiction depicts black people. Indeed, language entangles its users even when they mean to be honest: the way “The President Has Never Said the Word Black” interprets it, codes of racial silence and fatuous civility muzzle the biracial leader of the free world—“When he opens his mouth / a chameleon is inside, starving.” Thus, Parker’s restorative project—her vision of democratic and psychological health—comprises many smaller battles over how to describe, archive, and remake the world. She has as much faith in the human imagination as Wallace Stevens, to whom “13 Ways of Looking at a Black Girl” explicitly alludes, ever did. A new poetics might point toward a new politics. Our bodies are always on our minds. Women’s bodies in particular remain a site of intense conflict, with various institutions, often dominated by men, seeking to survey and administer them. Here too the poet seeks a counter-discourse of what you might call exuberant anxiety. Parker’s typical speaker is an edgy, loquacious introvert, alive to the world, especially its cities, but wary of its terrible shocks and slow-motion losses. “I am an elastic / winter,” asserts “Hottentot Venus.” The speaker of “Afro” is “glowing like / treasure in my autopsy.” “Black Woman with Chicken” centers upon a “Blurry / princess, self-narrating,” who in turn finds the world to be a “wondrous glut.” “It’s Getting Hot in Here So Take Off All Your Clothes” (named after the hook to a Nelly song) is narrated by someone who escapes men that “shout like lizards” and finds ecstatic annihilation: “I step into a volcano / & melt like the witch I am. I want to be flawed // all the way to bed.” That same speaker concludes with a challenge to would-be lovers, declaring “How, even with flaws / under these clothes I could be the boss // of you without them.” Parker’s power doesn’t emerge from ideological hectoring or topical reportage. Nor does it consist in blunt confessional disclosure. These poems are not essays with line breaks. Hers is a poet’s labor, which means that it is more broadly aesthetic and imaginative than any journalistic prose could be, and stranger. What does it mean to have an embodied mind in America in 2017? What if that body is black, or a woman’s, or some other marginalized individual’s? What if it isn’t? Poetry and the police both drag their subjects into view, but the former is much more likely to have the citizen’s best interests in mind. Ultimately, Parker conceives of contemporary, technologically mediated selfhood as a messy, contingent endeavor rather than something governed by theoretical exactitude. It never ends, and you never get the results you want. “I am a tree and some fruits are good and some are bad,” concludes the first poem. The best we can do, suggests “Another Another Autumn in New York,” is pay attention and sing when the world deserves it. I bless the dark, tuck myself into a canyon of steel. I breathe dried honeysuckle and hope. I live somewhere imaginary. Parker has been taking detailed notes; her lyric exegesis of life in America is unlike anything I’ve read in a long time. One could list forebears: Gwendolyn Brooks, Frank O’Hara, Adrienne Rich, William Carlos Williams, even John Ashbery. But Parker has created her own voice. There are many things more beautiful than Beyoncé, or as beautiful, and a whole lot of them ended up in these pages. Ryan Boyd (@ryanaboyd) is a poet and critic living in Los Angeles, where he teaches at the University of Southern California.

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