

November 25, 2016 - Morgan Parker's first book of poetry, *Other People's Comfort Keeps Me Up At Night*, was selected by Eileen Myles for the 2013 Gatewood Prize. Her second collection, *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*, is out on Tin House in 2017. She works as an editor, teaches creative writing, and co-curates the Poets With Attitude reading series. She and Angel Nafis are The Other Black Girl Collective . You can find her on Twitter.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2381 words.

Tags: Writing, Poetry, Beginnings, Process, Identity.

Morgan Parker on poetry and the everyday

On being a poet

I hated poetry until sophomore year of college. I took a poetry class. I don't know what made me take it, but even when I was in high school, I went to a writing camp and I just wanted to be a writer. I was never really good at prose, but I was passionate and loved writing and could write a sentence. When I went to writing camp, I was put in the poetry class and called my parents and was so pissed off. I was like, "This is bullshit, this is weird hippy shit, I hate this, it has nothing to do with me." That was my relationship towards poetry. So it did take a minute.

In my freshman year, I would write poems, but they were really just jokes about my roommate that I would read at parties to my friends. It was an entertaining thing, but I didn't take it seriously at all. When I took a poetry class at college, it was the first time that I was like, "Oh, poems are also this." I had always thought it was whatever bullshit you get taught in high school. It's just basically Robert Frost, and that's it. I was like, "This has nothing to do with me" until I read more contemporary poets in college classes. I tried it and I found it fun. I found it freeing to be able to write about my life and to try out different forms in that way. I was still thinking about it as an exercise. My professor was like, "Morgan, did you know that this stuff is really good?" I really wasn't even thinking about it like that. It really took someone else saying, "This is actually good and can be better." That put the idea in my head.

There are so many rules in poetry that there are no rules. I felt like I could do anything. It provided structure, but it also gave me rules to break. That was what was exciting. I felt like I could do whatever I wanted. That's still my creative process, where I'm just like, "I don't know, I'm just going to do whatever I want." Even if people say, "This is not what you're supposed to do or say."

On conceptualizing a book

I know a lot of writers who have something in mind before they start. I have never really conceptualized a book before writing it. With my first book, it was some of the first poems that I ever wrote. I, of course, had no idea that it was going to be a book. In that case, it was a moment of, "Oh, I have this many poems, I wonder if there is a book to be made out of them."

With the second book, I don't know, once I put some poems together, I started to see where the connections were and how to finish it, basically. What was missing from that collection of poems. That's always really fun. Sometimes it happens consciously. Those connections. But a lot of times it doesn't, and that's always really exciting to look back and say, "Oh, something is happening subconsciously that I didn't even really know in the writing of the poems."

On staying creative

I give myself challenges. That's sort of the way I conceive of projects—I dare myself to try something. Mostly what this means is I run with a lot of weird ideas, and most of them turn out to be failed attempts.

On pop culture in poetry

I know I'm supposed to care about timelessness, but I don't. Honestly, the world might not be here tomorrow, so I'm just like, "Let me say whatever I need to say in the language that I need to say it and not sit here scratching my head thinking about how I can best describe a tree that will cross generations." I don't care about that. I think that it's an unreasonable pressure to put on poets and I think those poems are boring. They're not really reflective of anything. Poems have always had time stamps. We pretend that they don't, but we have an entire English class on how to read it based on the context of the time, so I'll leave that to the internet. Folks can figure it out.

This is hilarious: When I was writing the Beyoncé poems I was like, "Man, I better find a publisher really fast because I don't know if she's going to really still be popular or be relevant." Whatever. You've just kind of got to follow instincts and I think that it's almost like, "Okay, but how can I say this without removing time?" Maybe those just aren't the kind of poems I'm interested in writing. I want it to feel a trillion percent like right now. That's my project. I've never been interested in a kind of timeless art because art comes from a place and a time, and a body that lives in a particular time. That feels central I think to what excites me about poetry.

Folks think of poetry as this timeless something that's in a vacuum of beauty. It's hotel art, it's just nice. It sounds nice and that's what it's for, and all of the best poets that are writing today, in my opinion, do not write those poems. It sometimes doesn't sound nice. It's more reflective of their lived experiences, and I guess in our current American climate there's such a need for urgent art, and poetry has a way of getting to the point. A lot of poets are able to say more and say it more honestly. A lot of people are just ready for it. They're ready to hear something real. I think a lot of poetry is doing that. Also, poetry is scary to people because it isn't always about logic or understanding.

It has this way of interacting with all the senses. It's sound and it's feel and it's color and all these things. It isn't linear. I don't think our brains work that way. They don't think in sentences. It's more splotches of things. I think that poetry has a way of reflecting the actual human mind, which is really fun but also scary to people.

Morgan Parker recommends:

Carrie Mae Weems

Mickalene Thomas

lavender baths

There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé: the playlist

therapy

On people discovering poetry through the title of her book, *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*

That's one of the reasons I titled the book this way. I do think that more people like poetry than think they do. I guess it's a trick, right? You see this thing and you're like, "Oh, this is interesting" and you open it up and it's just me talking about how sad I am. That's a weird trick, but I do think that I've always been interested in having my work be accessible. I think that's because I felt like poetry was so inaccessible to me. I really want to work to have it not be something that intimidates folks, or is scary. Writing about pop culture has always been interesting to me because I am writing about my life and it would be really inauthentic if I wrote an entire book and it didn't mention Jay Z. That is not my experience. If I wrote a book and it didn't mention the *Housewives*, that would just be false, you know?

I've always been interested in how to bring those things into poetry and into more literary or profound kind of musings. Why can't those things go together? That's how our minds work. The Beyoncé poems, when I started writing them, it was like five years ago. She was not who she is now.

People were like, "Why are you writing about Beyoncé?" Now no one asks me that, they kind of get it because she means something else now whereas before people were like, "Why her? That's so random". Actually, when I started the book it was a project with a friend of mine. He was writing about Lady Gaga who at the time was bigger than Beyoncé. We were interested in their collaboration and were inspired by that so we decided to do these poems...and then I didn't stop. I don't know. There was something about writing as her, I guess in her invented voice, that allowed me to put on a particular mask and say whatever I needed to say.

A lot of what I write about is Black womanhood and contemporary life and performance and sex and anxiety and all these things and I think she provided a really interesting lens to do that with. It was fun for me to break up my own voice with her voice and other outside voices and find the links in there, I guess because I am writing about my experience but I want it to be more of connecting my experience to that of others. It felt like a good way to do that.

It also was fun just fun, you know?

She might show up again later, but I think, once I saw that I was writing this book, I tried to shape the project. Pop culture figures make their way into my poems anyway, but I'm done with that particular project. I'm leaving a period of my life where if anything happened with her, I would get a bunch of

emails from people: "Where's a poem about this?" I just had to stop at some point.

On *There Are More Beautiful Things* being seen as a manual or guidebook for living

I don't know about making one's life better, but I definitely want to give readers permission in the way that I have decided to give myself permission to be as honest as possible and to be vulnerable on the page and to yes, probably say things that I shouldn't to the general public, but I am like, "I'll take this one for the team and say all my shit so that y'all can feel safe to do the same and to not feel ashamed of those darker moments". There's a little bit of that, but also I wanted it to be very all encompassing. I guess when you say a guidebook, handbook-like thing, it's kind of that. Here's a guide to contemporary, American, Black womanhood. I tried to cover as many bases as possible.

I could write volumes and volumes on Black womanhood, of course, but I'm really trying to get at a multiplicity and say that all these things can exist at once. This speaker, this symbol, this person can be at once vulnerable and strong and can be celebrated but also leered at. I think so often things are put into binaries and into a handful of categories and I wanted the book to feel like busting out of that. In the writing of it, that's what I tried to do. You can sense the frustration and the tension in there because that really is the writing process, and so the idea then is that readers will also feel that way.

On Beyoncé reading these poems

I didn't think about that when I was writing them, obviously, but now I'm like, "Come on!" She has to know who I am! She has to know! She must have an intern somewhere who's like, "Who the fuck is this person in my Google alerts?" Like I said, it's not a thing where I was thinking about that, otherwise I wouldn't have written half the poems. Honestly, first of all, I did ask someone who knows her if I would get sued. That was the only thing, but I was like, "Well, either way, I'll have good press. I could always do the talk show circuit, 'Girl who gets sued by Beyoncé'. Cool, great, fantastic".

The poems aren't about her. Her name is there, but the poems aren't about her at all. Yeah, I would be interested to hear what she thinks but it's not like she would be reading her biography, you know?

I think it's been interesting for folks to figure that out. I think it's easy to say, "Oh, here's the poems about Beyoncé" but then to hear the way that people, I don't know, kind of discover that they're not, or try to figure out what Beyoncé then is a symbol or metaphor for.

On being seen as a "rising literary star"

I have a big mouth, I'm around a lot, I like to go out, I like to give readings and talk to people. I'm actually trying to entertain myself and make myself laugh. I think folks respond to that.

I guess that's considered cool for a poet, who people think of as someone sitting in a weird attic in Northampton and just crying. And that's not what I'm doing.

I guess I'm just a people person. Also, probably to my own detriment, I try to be super real and upfront. I don't consider the consequences of that and I think that keeps energy in my work. That's a lot of what people are responding to. But, yeah, I don't know. I think the fact that I sometimes push against rules and expectations, I think that must be part of it.

On relatability

Relatability is something I care a lot about. I'm always saying that my target audience is sad Black girls in college. I want to reach them, and make them feel okay. If people need something to laugh at, I'm there to offer myself. I'm not interested in being mysterious or anything like that. I don't have the time or energy to cultivate that. I would rather be like, "Alright, here's what it is, take it or leave it. Know what you're getting yourself into."

Relatability is something that means a lot to me and I think it's because for so much of my life I've felt very alienated. I would love to, if I can, prevent anyone from feeling that way.

Name

Morgan Parker

Vocation

Writer, Poet

Fact

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