

## Stepmotherland

**Darrel Alejandro Holnes**

University of Notre Dame Press (Feb 1, 2022)

Softcover \$15.00 (104pp)

978-0-268-20216-3

An autobiographical odyssey from Panama to Texas, Darrel Alejandro Holnes's poetry collection *Stepmotherland* ponders split identities through art, current events, and religion.

Of African and Chocó descent, Holnes describes himself as "Black but not black enough": a mixed-race background and queerness complicate his access to the American dream. Through four sections, the book replicates his passage from Central America. "Foreigner" recreates his early life, including his parents' marriage and the US invasion of Panama in 1989; "Immigrante" captures his new life in Houston; "Citizen" mulls over dangers to Black lives; and "Patriot" encapsulates the struggle to reconcile his sexuality with those three previous selves.

The poetry takes a multitude of forms. "Links" is a string of one-liners, its mini-sentences separated by periods; "Poder" is a long prose poem. "Scenes from Operation Just Cause" is written as a screenplay, while "African-Americanize" is one of several definitions that range from literal to tongue-in-cheek. Holnes swings between the first and second person and sprinkles in Spanish phrases. In "OTM or Other Than Mexican," there's a staccato rhythm to the rundown of the diversity of the Latinx immigrant experience: "Other than coyote / We ride *La Bestia*."

The erotic and devotional mix in provocative ways, as in "Conception" ("My hands reach under your dress and find / Mary before she bore the word *immaculate* onto our tongues") and two later riffs on the Virgin birth motif. One of these, "Rihanna & Child," reflects on an Instagram image of the singer posed as the Black Madonna. The pop culture references also include contemporary paintings and classic films. "Ferguson, USA" and a remark on the overvaluing of opinions ("People believe more / in their points of view than in facts") bring the work up to the minute.

Traversing countries and languages, *Stepmotherland* is a timely and multifarious poetry collection with incisive crosscultural commentary.

REBECCA FOSTER (January / February 2022)

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