

Review of *Count Each Breath* by Maria James-Thiaw

Review by Jaimee D. Cali

Maria James-Thiaw's latest collection of poetry, *Count Each Breath*, evokes images of Eric Garner and George Floyd's deadly encounters with police and the systemic racism built into our justice system. This three part collection each titled, *Dispair-ities*, *Locked Down*, and *Ride Up*, takes the reader through James-Thiaw's health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and racial injustice in 2020.

The collection opens with the poem "Rage", which explains that women who *rage* are fearsome creatures. There are names in our society, dirty, derogatory names, for women who rage. Yet, history has taught us that women who rage are the ones that bring change. In this bold and powerful poem, James-Thiaw takes the oftentimes weaponized word *rage*, that conjures images of anger, violence, fire, and destruction, and depicts it as beauty and grace. By embracing female rage from the start, James-Thiaw speaks to society through her poems, as if she's staring at it in the eye, daring it to blink first.

The poem "Rage" also offers readers a different perspective on the five stages of grief. Ending with anger instead of acceptance, James-Thiaw depicts an alternative timeline to the grieving process, implying that the stages are not compartmentalized, but more of a fluid motion. She begins by describing a woman who is resigned to the fact that she will never do all that she wanted to in life. Though the poem is about death, I couldn't help but think of all the women in history who had to "fold up their somedays" and "put things unfinished-/things that were never meant to be." Yet, despite all, women like James-Thiaw, have carried on to carve a visible place in society. The speaker's pain is precise and cutting as she leaves readers with an eternal flame, guiding us through the rest of her work. James-Thiaw is not just speaking for herself in these final lines of the first poem, but for all women who burn the candle at both ends and who fight long after the fight has left them.

James-Thiaw concludes her collection with a very frank discussion on freedom, Her third and final part shifts focus to civil rights and recent events. You can't read the title of the poem and not picture Eric Garner, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others taken by a system built on injustice. The author addresses these crimes head on in her poem "Life Matters." It is perhaps her most powerful poem on racial injustice and motherhood in the collection as James-Thiaw gets to the heart of the matter. She catalogs the many deaths and the weight Black mothers carry. The poem ends with these lines, a haunting epitaph:

*“When your child’s needs are special,
the weight gets heavier, but
their lives matter, too.”*

There is a breath of depth in each of the poems that speaks to the complexity of womanhood, especially Black womanhood. In this poem in particular, I thought back to the woman in “Rage” and wondered what she might say to the speaker of this poem. Was she still raging? Would they rage together? And, was there enough rage between them to fuel the fires of change?

Throughout the collection, James-Thiaw keeps her focus on women and their unique position within society amidst the chaos around them. She emphasizes on the Black female experience in all these events as the crown jewel of her work. As a woman, I wanted to rage at society and rattle the bars of my cage—shake my bones until I am free, until we all were free.



Maria James-Thiaw is an award-winning poet, performer, and playwright. She is the author of four poetry collections and her work has been published in numerous journals and anthologies including *Black Lives Have Always Mattered*, and *Essential Voices: A Covid19 Anthology*. Poems from her play, *Reclaiming My Time: An American Griot Project*, won the Art of Protest Award from Penn State University’s Center for American Literary Studies in 2018. Maria James-Thiaw is the founder of Reclaim Artist Collective, an organization that brings her American Griot Project programming to marginalized

communities.



Jaimee D. Cali's life long passion is reading and writing. She received her MA in English Literature from Monmouth University. She is an adjunct professor of English at Brookdale Community College and is also the Lead Fiction Instructor for the online educational platform, *The Social Writerly* where she teaches genre fiction, thriller, fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Jaimee enjoys cooking, baking, crocheting, and candle-making.