

‘the Colored page’ by Matthew E. Henry is a far reaching collection that seeks to converse with a variety of actors in the social world whilst simultaneously questioning a great deal of societal injustice from systemic inequality and injustice to racism.

Henry does not avoid direct questioning and instead attacks stereotypes and queer comparisons such as ‘to treat Black hair like a pregnant woman’s belly’. Such lines disrupt wider societal acceptance of stereotypical assumptions whilst almost jokingly contrasting the associated pain and suffering with lines such as ‘I learned that they think I can’t swim’. Henry’s confrontational yet sardonic style adds even greater nuance to such inequality, framed through the words of lived experience by a Black man. Much of the language and narrative within this collection is reminiscent of the seminal works of Franz Fanon as Henry takes on what it means to be a Black person, a Black-American and a quite frankly, a human being beyond racialization.

Pieces such as ‘self-evident’ present a striking balance the history of Henry’s home, the United States and the collective history and its associated shackles that bound him to a world of systematic inequality and difference at large. ‘Mannish water’ returns to such a balance whilst presenting a dichotomy that is characteristic of this collection; fitting in whilst maintaining one’s culture. Somber imagery such as ‘Black bodies locked in this room’ and the notion of ‘Zero tolerance’ present a harrowing picture of growing up in an educational system, and indeed, a society that always manages to other the minority whilst ensuring their systematic oppression through scapegoating and manipulation.

‘we all have to make sacrifices’ elucidates the aforementioned whilst forcing the reader to content with the trials and tribulations faced by Black-Americans on a macro and micro level. Henry makes the reader think beyond the margins of this collection, beyond the rhetoric of society and asks the reader two simple questions continuously throughout this poem; Do we, as Black people not deserve rights? Alongside, how many more lives must be lived under fear, tyranny and grandiose, systematic oppression? It these questions that stuck with me during my multiple reads of this collection.

This collection of a poetry brings tears to one’s eyes, whilst presenting a variety of social and philosophical questions drawn from the repository of Henry’s lived experience. As a whole, this collection can be summed up as; Haunting, bold and necessary. My only hope for this incredible collection is that it succeeds in changing narratives of oppression and inequality and remedies generations of inequality.