

## Poetry & Prose Anthologies

Katherine Gallagher

**Nicole Moore, ed. *Brown Eyes: a selection of creative expressions by black & mixed race women* (Matador, 9 De Montfort Mews, Leicester LE1 7FW; 2005), 268 pages, ISBN: 1 905237 14 6, £9.99, pbk.**

This anthology of poetry, autobiographical writing and interviews is eclectic and revelatory. The authors are black and mixed race women mostly in their twenties and thirties and the juxtapositions of their writings creates a kaleidoscopic effect. In keeping with the book's epigraph from Bob Marley about looking to the day when skin colour is no more significant than eye colour, editor Nicole Moore explains her aims as being 'to discover new and diverse talent, ensure representation and to promote poetry and autobiographical writing of black and mixed-race women from African and African-Caribbean backgrounds' with all the 'heightened perspectives available to those who come with 'new eyes'. This play on 'new' is central and carries many ironies as 'old' problems point up the vital importance of discovering different approaches and outlooks.



Moore has divided the book into sections: EXPRESSO: Why do we write? CHOCOLATE: Who do you think we are? CINNAMON: What's it like being us? WALNUT: You don't sound / look / act black. BEIGE: When will our skin colour be just a colour? Moore's sectioning the book off into skin-shades as above, puts the emphasis on society's general obsession with skin-colour. The writers tell their narratives, presenting their view of how they're seen by others from schooldays on, inside and outside their communities. At the same time, we see how they see themselves as they fight for identity and belonging. 45-year old Moore is keen to make a point and her ironies are not lost on the reader who is exalted, touched and often angered by the situations described and the sufferings undergone by the vulnerable. Paradoxically, writing about difficulty has given them strength. They have become writers and often state their resolve to keep writing. In her Foreword Joy Francis commends the diverse range of the voices here – 'passionate, intelligent, funny, assertive, modest, reflective and spiritual'.

This very diversity is uplifting and makes *Brown Eyes* an excellent text for use in secondary schools (with all age groups) and colleges. It is a book about reclaiming the past; it is also a yearning for belonging, in Britain as well as Africa or whatever the place of origin / residence. Hybridity is a major theme:

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*'Home is where the heart is.  
I guess my heart is there  
far away in Africa, where I should be  
year after year'. (Ony Uhiara)*

Africa sits large in many poems and extracts as the great 'Mother' and great 'Other'. The ironies of such a yearning are captured in Amanda Epe's poignant essay, *I Am*. She goes through her 70s British childhood and adolescence following her parents' emigrating from the West African countries of Nigeria and Ghana ('school was the European culture; home was the African culture'). Finally, ten years after leaving school, she goes to Nigeria, meets her 'other' family and weeps, weeps with joy. A coming home. But here, she is seen as 'different', she knows she is 'different'. She concludes her essay by balancing what she missed in her African heritage alongside the pluses of growing up 'intercultural' in London. Her British life has given her the advantage of 'freedom and freeness, education and healthcare and celebrating the equality of gender. Most importantly, though my parents detest this act and would not allow it, I am a first generation that escaped the dreadful ritual of female mutilation. That, for me, is complete jubilation.'

There are so many angles in this book. Sheree Mack's poem, *Ethnic Origin*, points to the dilemma of wondering which box to tick.

*But the more descriptors put in place  
Only entangles me further in the question of race  
I'm British that's what I want to say*

*But that's equated with white, always.*

Portia Msimang, believing in her world-citizenship, stresses the need to explore 'blackness', rejecting terms such as 'mulatto', 'coloured', or 'mixed race'. There is no 'separate but equal'. When I look in the mirror, a black woman stares back at me. In those eyes, there is a slight weariness from 30 years of arguing to be black.'

Danielle Imbert sees things differently. 'It doesn't feel like there are any books out there by mixed-race people. Everything I have ever read is from a black perspective or a white perspective...I hope my work and the *Brown Eyes* anthology give people a sense of what mixed-race people go through. I hope they understand that you are not white and you are not black, that there is something different and that's okay.'