

Brown Eyes: A Selection of Creative Expressions By Black and Mixed-Race Women

By Leila Kamali

Nicole Moore, Editor
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According to the editor Nicole Moore, 'The aim [of *Brown Eyes*] was to discover new and diverse talent, ensure representation and act as a medium for black and mixed-race women [in Britain] to speak out and reach a much wider audience.' This anthology, which appears to be compiled, in part, from writers' workshops, consists of poems and essays, as well as interviews in which contributors elucidate their approaches to their work. Moore's editorial strategy thus establishes a promising counterpoint from which dialogue might emerge, not only between writers, but also from the shifts in pace and inflection which emerge between diverse forms.

There are indeed moments of inspiration to be enjoyed here, particularly in the sensitive illumination of historical memory in a poem such as Maggie HARRISE's 'Origins':

Yes, track me the scent of my
Skin on a coast of Paramaribo
Where a trade wind blowing its
Precious cargo
doesn't know that one day
they'll build rockets
from behind those trees and
aim for the moon

The memory of slavery resounds powerfully in some pieces, nowhere more so than in Louise HERCULES' poem, 'The Quay', as she evokes 'the gaze of those so ready to slay your hand from mine', or as Kimberly TRUSTY imagines a 'slave ship/turned upside down/on the banks of the Ohio River'. The movement, both historical and current, of lives lived across diverse terrains, is vividly felt in a poem such as 'Home' by Tolu MELISSA CAREW:

When I put my arms around my lover
And kiss his face
I am home...
I am in Victoria Island, Biaduo.
I am 10.



Less exciting is the frequent appearance throughout this volume of bland mythologisations of African matriarchs, and equally, of matriarchal Africas. Contributors wax lyrical on this well-worn theme, from a simple glorification of black femininity, such as Lynda Wireko's 'Woman black woman, I see God's beauty within you', to an abstraction of the figure of the black mother with a generalised African motherland in Amanda Epe's 'The Diaspora':

She stands central and
large...
Her dispersed seed across the
oceans
Evolved into a beautiful life

The exaltation of the matriarch forms only part of the very large dose of essentialising racial 'pride' which this volume delivers, conveyed with a plentiful array of clichés and rhymes such as 'The black race is Ace/We all go through hard times./But nothing can take away our gifted minds.'

Nicole Moore, in her introduction, writes that 'Brown Eyes is meant to celebrate, reflect upon and embrace our diverse female identities and the common-thread that unites us living the UK experience.' The terms 'black' and 'mixed-race' are used in the context of this collection to refer to 'women from African and African-Caribbean backgrounds'; and diversity and commonality, which Moore so rightly identifies as values which should be held in balance in such an anthology as this, are indeed broadly represented. Yet the volume is divided into sections with titles such as 'Cinnamon: What's it like being us?', 'Chocolate: Who do you think we are?', and 'Beige: When will our skin colour be just a colour?' Isn't there something deeply questionable about representing identity through food analogies, let alone about grading skin tone as if it were a selection of paint swatches? There is a distinct sense that Moore guides the focus of the volume into something of a cul-de-sac based upon her own rather fixed understanding of cultural identity, and this can elicit a certain (perhaps unintentionally) bemused candour such as is shown by Daniella Blechner: 'I don't go out and look for books that are by mixed-race women. I look for books that appeal to me.'



In her own poem, which begins with the line 'Colour, hue, I just love you', Moore surmises that:

It's more than just a colour
That creates fear amongst
ignorance
It's the unknown face
Of difference

Moore's concluding comment to her own essay, elsewhere in the volume, reads: 'It isn't problematic that mixed-race people are bi-racial or of dual-heritage; it is that there is so much silence, ignorance and racism.' The reader is forced to ask whether simply naming a problem in this way really does the work that 'creative expression' surely can, of reconciling marginalised subjects with a society which seeks to exclude or devalue them.

At times, this volume provides useful responses to the challenge which seems to be set in its very title. Portia Msimang demonstrates awareness of the differential which often exists between the terms 'black' and 'mixed-race' as they function in everyday use:

Here and now, we are in a
position to abandon the
scientifically discredited, morally
repugnant philosophies, which
have elsewhere demonstrably
decreased the vulnerability of
those who are willing to embrace

their status as 'mulatto',
'coloured', or 'mixed-
race'... When I look in the
mirror, a black woman reflects
back at me. In those eyes, there
is a slight weariness from 30
years of arguing to be allowed to
be black...The reflection I see
in windows...walks with head
held high because inside it, I
carry my heritage, the
unshakeable belief in world
citizenship, with great care.

Dorothy Cornibert du Boulay, similarly, recognises the power of an identification which transcends uncomfortable racial hierarchies, when she asserts 'I realised that black was global'. Signifiers, like poetry itself, can transcend distances and divisions in order to assert a place for marginalised identities within a continuum of human diversity, and it is clearly in this way that the use of any particular identification, whether 'black' or 'mixed-race', is most liberating and productive. Sheree Mack puts it nicely: 'I'm a "mixness". There is no box to tick for that.' Emma Louise Felicia Hopkins's poem, 'All I Can Want is What There Is', can similarly be seen as a clever response to this volume's overarching focus on skin tone:

All colours treat lives like
shades
Like safe bait
Tight in their skin, possessive
in pace
All features fester
And colour is my self-defence

Brown Eyes fulfils its promise of offering exposure to some talented writers, but if Moore proceeds with her professed plan to produce two further such volumes, she would be well advised to enforce slightly more stringent 'quality control' over contributions, as well as undertaking a careful consideration of what it means to truly represent diversity.