

ROOT

News, Information and Views

From time to time we publish articles that are relevant to current affairs/events. *IS THE OCR RACIST? A Cautionary Tale* may be of some interest to you

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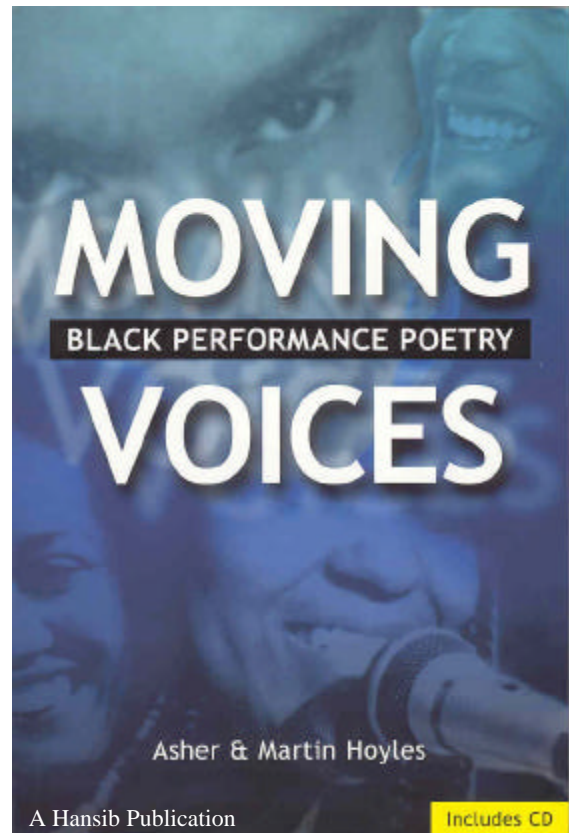
IS THE **Oxford Cambridge** **And** **Royal Society of Art** **Examining Board** RACIST? **A Cautionary Tale**

Imagine our delight when the OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA) Examining Board expressed an interest in putting the poetry in our book, *Moving Voices: Black Performance Poetry* (Hansib 2002), on their GCSE English Literature syllabus. After six months of discussions they agreed to 'endorse' the book as part of their 'Opening Minds to Different Cultures' rationale and we set to work selecting the first 16 poems to be an option on their GCSE syllabus from September 2003.

The final meeting to agree the poems was due to take place in Cambridge on 12 February 2003. A few days before, they rang up to say that they were no longer prepared to include this poetry. They had consulted six English teachers (all white) and along with the senior examiners (all white), they had concluded that the poems were not acceptable. When we asked if any black teachers had been consulted, there was a silence and then the answer came, 'No.'

In particular they objected to a poem about menstruation — 'it would be difficult to teach it in a mixed class'. When I (Martin) said I had been an English teacher in east London secondary schools

for ten years and that such issues were regularly



Moving Voices was published to coincide with Black History Month in October 2002.

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dealt with in the English classroom, the reply came: 'I have never been a teacher, but I have been a journalist, and just think what the *Sun* would make of it when they found out.' Even if this poem were left out, they were still not prepared to go ahead with the other poetry.

So there we have it. An 'Opening Minds to Other Cultures' initiative has been judged by an all white jury and found wanting, and the GCSE English syllabus for our children has been determined by the possible reaction of a tabloid newspaper!

Breaking through is hard to do!

Timetable of Events

18 July 2002

We are invited to an OCR English Action Group meeting to discuss their interest in work 'reflecting multicultural Britain'.

1 August

They say: 'we are very keen to meet with you to discuss your work — we are definitely looking to promote literary cultural diversity as part of our Opening Minds rationale for the new GCSEs in English and English Literature'. We are invited to a meeting in Birmingham on 19 September.

5 August

They write: 'Great news that you may well be able to attend our meeting; we're like kids waiting for Christmas — very excited!'

20 September

After Martin attended the meeting: 'It was good to meet you yesterday — and to be introduced to Moving Voices, which we were all very impressed with and excited by.' They suggest endorsing the book, after it is seen by a consultant, as a set text for GCSE English Literature. Two clean texts for the exams would then be printed, each with 16 poems. The book would be promoted on their website and they 'would be keen to run conferences/workshops relating to Moving Voices and the teaching of Different Cultures open to teachers/students/others with an interest'.

22 October

After sending them reviews of the book, they write: 'Excellent reviews. I managed to access your web-

site: very impressive poets section, plus audio.'

3 December

We receive the report of the senior examiner who says 'arising from several hours of reading and listening to the poems' that 'Moving Voices would be a valuable addition' to the OCR's GCSE texts and suggests 'possible pairings' of the poems. Some will be difficult to include 'on the grounds of length', but it would be 'possible to overcome such difficulties'.

He concludes: 'Moving Voices offers an interesting alternative to OCR's present texts. It includes poems with strong rhythms dealing with contemporary issues, and should have an appeal to candidates unlikely to be attracted by "traditional" poetry. I suspect that, if adopted, it might best be used in English (1900) where study of poems, rather than comparison of poems, is required; and where it would provide a powerful stimulus to Speaking and Listening activities.'

10 December

We are told that the endorsement has been 'agreed at the last English Action Group meeting' and they set out their reasons for 'wanting it in English Literature', rather than English: 'A further reason for wanting it in Literature is so that we can say we are actively encouraging a multicultural education, rather than just responding to a QCA* directive for Different Cultures in English. This latter point is, for me, particularly important because we are being pro-active rather than re-active and sits well with our Opening Minds ethos.'

11 December

'The timeframe we are hoping to work to for this revised Moving Voices text is to set it for examination from June 2005. This means that it would be available for teaching from September 2003.'

20 January

After we suggested that we would divide the poems into 2 volumes of eight pairs of poems in each (for setting exam questions asking students to compare two poems), we are told: 'I look forward to seeing how you have gone about dividing up the poems into two sets — rather you than me!'

22 January

The Principal Examiner is brought in to comment on the selection: 'I think the revised 16-poem collection will work for the life of a poetry text (3 years?).' He suggests 13 poems, permitting

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‘questions on a range of topics: race/culture, women, humour and poetry itself’, adding: ‘Yes, I know there are less than 16 here, but the others are up to you!’

23 January

The original consultant examiner writes: ‘There’s some overlap between Asher and Martin’s suggestions and Lionel’s that should prove most helpful. Asher and Martin’s choice of poems that are linked, and their comments on their common ties are also very helpful from a question-setting viewpoint.’ He has an ‘occasional reservation’ about length, but says that ‘this needn’t be an obstacle’.

24 January

OCR say they need to discuss ‘arrangements for publication’.

29 January

Discussing a date for a meeting to make the final decision on the poems, they write:

‘As we need to move quite fast on this, I think the sooner the better — Wednesday February 12.’

8 February

Phone-call to say they are no longer interested in using the poetry for the GCSE syllabus (see above).

11 February

We ask the Principal Examiner why this has happened and he replies: ‘No idea, sorry, it’s news to me.’

11 February

Phone-call from OCR saying it’s still off, but they are prepared to put the book on their web-site, link up with our web-site and offer us a fee! They promise to put all this in writing in an email the next day. (Incidentally, up to this point they had offered no money, even though we had sent them 10 copies of the book, worth £170, and they had not offered to pay any travelling expenses to Birmingham — not even a free lunch! They also expected us to pay the £150 fee for the consultant.)

12 February

Apologies that the letter has not been sent, but it has to be ‘on official letterhead’ so will be sent by post. It will be posted first class the next day.

18 February

The letter still has not arrived!

An OCR spokesman denied last week that institutional racism had anything to do with the decision, he said; “It may well be true that none of the teachers we consulted were black, but it’s irrelevant.” *New Nation* 17/3/03

19 February

3-page letter arrives from Dr Paul Norgate, OCR Qualifications Manager — English, Arts and Performance Studies, confirming that they are not going ahead with the Moving Voices collection of poems, and stressing again that ‘menstruation’ is a matter ‘unsuitable for the classroom’. The letter contains no word of apology, nor any explanation as to why the book was officially ‘endorsed’ and recommended by a senior examiner, principal examiner and the English Action Group.

* Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

IT’S BETTER POST- THAN PRE

By Patience Agbabi

I’m sitting on this toilet seat
I’m reading graffiti
and some of it’s political
and some of it is cheeky
but I only see red
coz I’m feeling rather freaky
when it comes to having PMT
no woman can beat me
I’m speedy I’m angry
I’m horny I’m stoned
I want to be touched
and I WANNA BE LEFT ALONE
PMT I pick my target
PMT I start to load
PMT I pull my trigger
my tits are ready to explode

*Stick em on stick em in stick em up gals
stick em on stick em in stick em up
if you wanna shoot an arrow
then it’s time to load your barrel
stick em on stick em in stick em up*

I remember that first memory
a dark red stain
I didn’t feel no nausea
I didn’t feel no pain
I was a woman a warrior
exotic arcane
and once a month a lunatic
in nappies and insane
My mum she bought the towels in
she didn’t make a fuss
she told me about men
and she said ‘It’s them and us’

An OCR official said the Boards’ consultant teachers and senior examiners had thought a poem about menstruation would be unsuitable for mixed classrooms.” *Times Education Supplement* 7/3/03

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mini regular
Super SUPER PLUS
I stuck em on I stuck em in
and then I stuck em up

*Stick em on stick em in stick em up gals
stick em on stick em in stick em up
If you wanna sate your lust
then insert a Super Plus
stick em on stick em in stick em up*

Remember waiting in the queue
to pay for that first pack
you're looking at the ceiling
with your hands behind your back
then it's you and the assistant
who's since got the sack
says 'DOCTOR WHITE'S MINI PRESS-ON
TOWELS
how much are they Jack?'
Or you're sitting on the toilet seat
one hand between your thighs
the other with instructions
on how to DIY
you hop skip and Jump about
you ought to win a prize
and your entire extended family
are queuing up outside

*Stick em on stick em in stick em up gals
stick em on stick em in stick em up
if you 're paranoid in public
I can't find a better subject
stick em on stick em in stick em up*

They have adverts on the telly
to say they are discreet
disposable collapsible
invisible and neat
the ones that make you sit as if
you're one of the elite
and ones that give you ATTITUDE
when walking down the street

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The ones that won't go down the loo
however much you try
that bloated towel or tampon
that simply will not die
and some that leak and some you like
and they're the ones you buy
if you're cool rosé is quite passé
you stick to extra-dry

*Stick em on stick em in stick em up gals
stick em on stick em in stick em up
If you're thinking of your image
then forget about your spillage
stick em on stick em in stick em
up*

Well some call it PMS
and some call it PMT
some say it's a deficiency
of vitamin B
some say it is a myth
some say it is reality
but those of us who have it know
it's better post- than pre-
some call it The Curse
from the story of Creation
the Time of the Month
or just menstruation
for the past, the present
and the future generation
I think it's time we gave ourselves
a STANDING OVULATION



PATIENCE AGBABI

Stick em on stick em in stick em up gals
stick em on stick em in stick em up
if you 're paranoid in public
I can't find a better subject
stick em on stick em in stick em up ■

Moving Voices traces the African oral tradition, though African American and Caribbean Culture, to black performance poetry in England, and examines the many factors which have shaped this oral poetry.

Twelve contemporary poets discussed their childhood and school experiences and how they became poets.

The poets include those born in the Caribbean – James Berry, Valerie Bloom, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, John Lyons and Cuban Redd; and those born in England – Adisa, Patience Agbabi, Michael Groce, Cynthia Hamilton, Asher Hoyles, Levi Tafari and Benjamin Zephaniah.



The Editors of Moving Voices Asher and Martin Hoyles
with their daughter Rosa