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*Breaking Black Boundaries: The Poetry of Rita Dove*

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors  
in the Department of Literature.

By  
LaVonna D. Wright

Under the mentorship of Joe Pellegrino

ABSTRACT

By tracing the motifs of domestic space, classical and popular music, and ballroom dancing within Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*, *Grace Notes*, *Sonata Mulattica*, and *American Smooth*, I assert that she both challenges and expands Black poetic culture by exploring topics previously considered outside of the purview of Black poets. This analysis allows me to demonstrate her ability as a poet to move beyond simplistic, derivative, and ultimately constraining cultural expectations. Dove uses these motifs to expand the critically and culturally-imposed constrictions of Black poetry.

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## Breaking Black Boundaries: The Poetry of Rita Dove

### Introduction

Rita Dove maintains a credo within her work and personal life: “If you can’t be free, be a mystery.” Being not only a poet, but an essayist, playwright, fiction writer, musician, and ballroom dancer, Dove is disinclined towards any labels or critics that compartmentalize her. Contrary to many of her contemporaries, Dove finds the most independence by not adhering to traditional themes central to African American poetry in the twenty-first century, those associated with movements such as the Black Arts movement and the New Black poetry movement. After publishing four volumes of poetry, Dove became the youngest person and first African American woman to be named US Poet Laureate, as well as the first African American since Gwendolyn Brooks to receive the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. She immediately looked away from preconceived notions of security and support within the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and instead crafted her own space in more inclusive and controversial artistic capacities.

Born in 1952 in Akron, Ohio to Ray A. Dove and Elvira Dove, Dove’s parents held great value in education and teaching its value to their four children. Their daughter Rita became interested in writing at an early age and began her academic pursuits of writing upon attending a local writing conference (Gates and Smith 1356). As a high schooler, Dove experienced the first national recognition of her talent by being invited to the White House as a Presidential Scholar, an award bestowed upon the top one hundred high school seniors in the nation each year. Completing her undergraduate studies at Miami University in Ohio in 1973, she graduated *summa cum laude* with a bachelor’s

degree in English. Following graduation, Dove went forth to study in West Germany at Tubingen University as a Fulbright Scholar; this milieu being quite influential to her work. Later, she completed graduate work at the University of Iowa and earned her MFA in 1977. Dove is the former president of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, served as the chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and is a member of the PEN American Center, the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Fellowship of Southern Writers. Through ten volumes of poetry, one novel, two dramas, and two libretti, as well as prominent positions in literary and cultural organizations, Dove has always carved her own path, and has always been recognized for this endeavor, whether that comes in the form of literary praise or objective criticism.

Dove deliberately maintains her independence as poet through the enigmatic nature of her interviews. Outside of her literary mastery, not much is known about Dove's personal life or how she occupies her time. In her interviews she refrains from revealing details about her personal life; she separates her identity from her audience's perception of her as manifested in her work. In several interviews for *Callaloo* and in *Conversations with Rita Dove*, Dove asserts her intent to present characters that are specific and individualized, "as persons who have their very individual lives, and whose histories make them react to the world in different ways" (83). This juxtaposition of her poetic project — where she insists on the specificity of her characters — and the deliberate veiling of the details of her own life, echoes her rejection of the boundaries that many Black writers find themselves trapped by. Though her work is enriched by her own experiences, Dove does not bind herself to her personal experiences, but rather "resists

the reader's, and perhaps her own, desire for order and completion" (Righelato 4). The majority of criticism surrounding Rita Dove stems from her enigmatic presence within the African American poetic community. However, her critics are definitely not limited to Black audiences, as her work in general creates "discomfort in some readers — both Black and white — in part because it expresses painful and controversial aspects of American and African American culture and history" (Pereira 1). However, what is most notable about Dove, is that regardless of how much controversy her work continues to generate within the literary dialogue, she is still overshadowed. Dove does not prioritize the opinions of others over her own poetic voice, remaining inconspicuous to the audience that gave literary acclaim to her poetic predecessors. She stands in juxtaposition to the more strident voices of contemporaries like Pat Paulsen, Audre Lorde, Jayne Cortez, or Ntozake Shange, she does not shame their five-alarm sense of urgency or disaffection. Dove "imbues perfectly composed poetry with subdued but powerful political messages" (Steffen 73). Her smoldering rage is easily passed over and she is rarely considered when poets and critics create the classifications of race, genre, and what it means to be a Black poet writing unabashedly Black Poetry.

To say that Rita Dove does not write what one expects Black Poetry to be forces us to consider the question: What is Black Poetry? To define Black Poetry, one must understand the inherent need for the realm of *Black* Poetry to exist. The primary goals of this genre are to confront white power structures and to assert Black agency. These characteristics establish boundaries in which Black poets can be seen and heard against the systemic literary world in which they carve out a unique space in the canon, where Black poets can be seen and heard. This space is an attempt to overcome the

disenfranchisement that many poets of color experience in a literary world where they are commonly disregarded and overshadowed. In the Overview of *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, Stephen Henderson defines Black Poetry as:

1. Any poetry by any person or group of persons of known Black African ancestry, whether the poetry is designated Black or not.
2. Poetry which is somehow *structurally* Black, irrespective of authorship.
3. Poetry by any person or group of known Black African ancestry, which is *also identifiably* Black, in terms of structure, theme, or other characteristics.
4. Poetry by any identifiably Black person who can be classed as a “poet” by Black people. Judgement may or may not coincide with judgments of whites.
5. Poetry by any identifiably Black person whose ideological stance vis-à-vis the history and the aspirations of his people since slavery is adjudged by them to be “correct.” (Henderson 7)

These criteria are problematic, in part because they are simultaneously broad, vague, yet constraining. Defining poetry, a group of people, or singular person as “identifiably” and “structurally” Black inherently creates grey areas that artists struggle to fit into. For Dove these identifying markers prove to be debilitating and myopic. Inadvertently, the definition of Black poetry as defined by scholars and the culturally accepted notion of Black Poetry, often positioned as the manifestation of a history begun in the trauma of slavery and segregation and healed in the power of theater, music, and lyrical narrative, stake out the boundaries of the Black poet’s art. This then narrows the space that the

genre of Black Poetry intentionally provided, and replaces them with identity markers that marginalize those unable to meet its criteria of what is regarded as “authentic” — such as the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar, who wrote in Black dialect and Standard English — and what is seen as nontraditional. Likewise, Dove upends the readers’ expectations by abstaining from the identity markers of normative Black Poetry, those one might expect given both her race and gender. Instead of accepting the spaces that are traditionally marked for Black poetry, Dove’s works authentically portrays untraditional facets of the Black experience as collective experiences, expanding readers’ perception of what it means to be Black, to be a woman, and to be human, without the suffocation and alienation of adhering to her critics and genre-defining expectations. Her prominence within the community of African American poets may, in some part, be due to her intentional defiance of such pigeonholing. Ignoring the boundaries that Black poets find themselves enclosed in by her contemporaries, other poets. Dove challenges the prevailing perceptions of Black Poetry with subtle poetic methods that uncover hidden histories and give voice to previously silent characters in a rich and engaging narrative. She does this not just at the personal level, but speaking for individuals, family units, and disenfranchised cultures. Her sense of connectedness to her ancestral history, indeed the very subjects that she tackles, are not preordained by her race, her gender, or her personal experiences and interests, but by her own sense of self. Dove remains confident in her sense of self throughout her career as a poet, and though she is well aware that “identifying attributes supposedly core to Black identity and culture” have ensured “the survival of African Americans in a racist society, she clearly recognizes the limitations of such notions” (Pereira 1). The subject matters that dominate the narratives within her

work, extend the boundaries of Black poetry and remind her audience of the human experience that expands beyond race. Her rejection of the poetic norms that constrain Black poets liberates her from the hollow ritual of determining which Black poets are “authentic.” She transforms the idea of theater, music, and song as being solely a response and healing mechanism to the trauma of slavery and segregation, to an idea that gives credit to the ways in which Black culture has always been a part of the conversation.

Ignoring the boundaries that Black poets find themselves enclosed in by expectations, Rita Dove challenges the prevailing perceptions of African American poetry with subtle poetic methods that give voice to previously silent characters in a rich and engaging narrative. She does this not just at the personal level, but speaking for individuals, families, and disenfranchised cultures. For Dove, literary portrayals of women and African Americans have been flat and predictably angry, and she seeks to resist that (Ratiner 200). Her sense of connectedness to her ancestral history, indeed the very subjects that she tackles, are not preordained by her race, her gender, or her class, but by her own sense of self. For Dove, a house divided will fall, and the defining features that house African American poetry set limiting parameters on what a Black poet can write about. Within her works, Dove challenges the notions of what defines poetry as “Black poetry” by not adhering to stereotypical themes and subject that her audience confines her to. She is asked this within a multitude of her interviews. In one with Therese Steffen she responds to the question of whether she creates “Black art,” stating:

It’s so confusing, so complicated, this notion of Black art. The concept is not pure: the insistence on Black art is just a device, a way of establishing territory or

generating publicity. It was necessary at one time to underscore that “otherness” in order to get any kind of respect whatsoever, but the insistence on difference also requires one to erect certain walls or obey certain rules all of which is anathema to the artist. When I was growing up, I did not think in terms of Black art or white art or any kind of art; I just wanted to be a writer. (Steffen 108)

In doing so, Dove uncovers hidden histories and cultivates the African American experience into being more so a human experience. Dove does this most efficiently through her depictions of domestic space and the recovery of memory. Her use of these motifs outside of the narrow understanding of what Black poetry typically exists as is illuminated by the motifs themselves and within her poems.

In an online news article from the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Dove is asked about the ways in which poetry can matter to unsuspecting readers and to communities — “‘What can we do, and can poetry even matter, and how can we speak against this?’ As an African American and a woman, I’ve been asking myself this question and wrestling with this question as I write for a long time” (Brendan). “This” being that way in which poetry is only recognized when it is safe, when it does not create tension or go against the grain of its conventions. She goes on to say that “bring to light human reactions to grander events, in the hope that people will recognize themselves in it” (Brendan). For Dove, the emphasis is on the human experience and communicating that across gaps between genders, races, and classes. Her work demonstrates that “one can be Black and have a wide array of subject matter, ideas, and emotions, which, although they are not ‘marked’ Black reflect one’s core identity and experiences as a Black person” (Pereira 9). Through tracing the motifs of orchestral music, ballroom dancing, and domestic space

within Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*, *Grace Notes*, *Sonata Mulattica*, and *American Smooth*, Dove challenges and expands Black history and culture, specifically through her recovering of hidden contributions of Black history. The culmination of these readings will address how her usage of topics that are outside of the African American poetic canon reflects her ability as a poet to move beyond simplistic and derivative cultural expectations. Dove utilizes these motifs to fight the displacement of the Black poet within universal spaces.

## Uncovering Universality within Black Domestic Space:

*Thomas and Beulah*

Domestic space has existed as an empowerment strategy, in part because of the nature of what it serves to do: provide a sanctuary, a place of freedom and vulnerability; a space where one can exist as their true authentic selves without fear of shame or silence. Olivia Edenfield defines, “the home and its importance as both backdrop and for extension of the self has been evident from the earliest of sketches” (41). Dove often employs the domestic milieu of women and girls within her poems. This social scene becomes slightly subverted in racial context: Black domestic space is not inherently the same as white domestic space. For African Americans, the veil of slavery has not ceased to tremor over all aspects of life. This works to ostracize Black home life from generalized home life, complicating or eliminating the agency and empowerment that it could provide to the Black woman operating within the home. Dove examines the complications of domestic space in many of her works, using it as a vehicle for connection and freedom in uncovering the human experience of Black domestic space.

Maria Proitsaki examines the role of the home in Rita Dove’s poetic works, relating them to bell hooks’ *Talking Back*. She explicates how bell refers to her childhood homeplace, how it shaped the experiences at home that was very impressionable to her writing career:

In the works of African American writers, girls employ empowering strategies that are less discernible, or which cannot be easily defined as resistance strategies. Most interestingly, however, although Black girls might avoid taking overtly

defiant positions against victimizing patriarchal attitudes and practices at home, they often manage to maintain a distinct autonomy and moreover, they might even succeed in influencing those around them. (21)

For the Black girl in Dove poems, she attains autonomy: an innate human desire for freedom and individuality. In the same way, Beulah from Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* navigates through domestic space as an aspect of her identity and gender role and of her own relationship between her husband, children, and the world around her in Depression-era America.

*Thomas and Beulah* is a semi-fictionalized chronological story about her grandparents, their relationship, and their lives. The book is split in half: "Mandolin" which is in Thomas's perspective and "Canary in Bloom" being in Beulah's. The uncovering of memory within domestic space in this work is a prime example of how Dove transforms a marginalized experience into a universal one. The poems, "Dusting," "Wingfoot Lake," and "The Oriental Ballerina" most successfully combine memory and domestic space in these ways.

Beulah's section of the work begins with the poem, "Taking in Wash." It takes place in a domestic scene that becomes metaphorically subverted due to the actions of her drunken father. Whereas she characterizes her father as "a beast / with stricken eyes / who screams the house awake" (47), her mother stays the same, "Mama never changed" (47). This male presence threatens the safe tranquil environment that the home represents, and forces the mother to reactionarily change, becoming "a tight dark fist" (47). The binaries in which women are supposed to exist within domesticity are indicative of a struggle between finding and fighting identity imposed as domestic duty and primary

caregiver. Domestic duty defines this poem, “Taking in Wash,” and Beulah’s mother. Yet, Beulah as a woman displays an ambivalence towards her independent needs and fulfilling a role imposed on her. Elizabeth Beaulieu defines this in the context of maternal ambivalence, stating that “the experience of maternal ambivalence ... provides a woman with a sense of her independent identity” (146). Another dimension of ambivalence towards her role within domestic space is Beulah’s race; as Beulah “is, after all, a Black woman only a couple generations removed from slavery” (145). Her heritage would have been defined by acts of mothers sacrificing to ensure their children’s survival, and to prevent their separation. These actions became the “legacy of slavery bequeathed to the twentieth-century Black woman” (145). In efforts to maintain an unactualized space, literal domestic space did not exist for the enslaved Black woman. The veil of slavery thus hangs over the realm of domestic space for Black women, and Beulah’s childhood experience affirms this. In the kitchen, a space that represents nourishment becomes subverted, a place that exposes the malnourishment of Beulah’s parental units. Beulah has no agency in the literal space as a child, but she is not confined to what domestic space is supposed to mean to her as a Black woman. Rita Dove utilizes the motif of domestic space to convey how Beulah becomes autodidactic in finding her identity, both within and outside of her domestic space.

Dusting continues to track the relationship between Beulah and domestic space. One of her most anthologized poems, *Dusting*, uses the commonplace act of dusting in relation to Beulah’s reminiscence of her youth. In this poem, Dove unites domestic space and memory into the experience. “Dusting,” is a free verse poem spoken from Beulah’s perspective. Beulah begins the poem by stating “Everyday a wilderness — no / shade in

sight.” The beginning of the poem starting with “everyday” suggests a tediousness of her dusting, as well as the everyday nature of the accumulation of dust. Beulah remains “patient among knickknacks” as she dusts. The depiction of knickknacks suggest a sense of fondness to a material thing. Knickknacks, often being a preservation of a fond memory or time, are significant to the act of dusting. As she dusts the knickknacks, she can clearly see what they are and the solarium bringing light to the “grainstorm” of dust metaphorically works to bind the everyday act of dusting to the memory of her and the fair date.

Righelato states that “Nature is imprisoned and reduced: the first reference to the “wilderness” is indicative of Beulah’s plight, and it is also a wilderness of “knickknacks,” of the seemingly futile repetition of labor” (94-95). The second stanza introduces more decorative elements of her domestic space as she dusts them. The scrolls and crests “gleam darker still” as she removes the dust from them. This reinforces the motifs of light and dark that permeate throughout the poem. The speaker then asks a rhetorical question which works to establish a personal relationship with the speaker and the reader. As Beulah recollects the memory of this boy, she distinctly recalls

his kiss and  
 the clear bowl with one bright  
 fish, rippling  
 wound! (13-16)

This realization occurs as she dusts the decorative elements of her furniture, reinforcing the recollection of youth, often portrayed as the more decorative, defining memories of one’s life. The dusting of her furniture induces the metaphorical dusting of her memory and as she draws nearer to remembering, she can at least recall what the boy gave her.

The movement of the fish within the clear bowl of water suggests a sense of clarity that she is now recovering, as well as a sense of movement and progression towards remembering his name and the completion of her dusting.

The turn of this poem occurs at the beginning of the third stanza. She draws closer to the identity of the boy, noting that his name is close to Michael but “something finer.” The personification of the dust strokes as “a deep breath” gives agency to this everyday act. Dusting works metaphorically to serve as an act of cleansing but also a force of nature, much like “light” in the first stanza, and is reinforced by the imagery of water throughout the poem. Dove implements nature as a motif to reinforce the inevitable natural course of memories becoming old, as well as the accumulation of dust. As her memory of the boy’s identity becomes more vivid to her, water imagery becomes more prominent within the poem. The memory itself now becomes “wavery,” aligning with her idea of home, placing the reader both in the home that she is as she dusts and the home that she returns to her dance in her youth. The home serves as a centerpiece of the memory that Beulah houses her memories in. The imagery of the door being blown open reinforces the act of dusting as a catalyst to her memory being jogged. The fish, being a part of that memory, is no longer confined to the memory itself; it is now dissolved from the “locket of ice” and is able to “swim free.” This state of water, transforms from solid ice to water, enabling the fish to have movement. The motif of water once again works in tandem with the state of Beulah’s memory and perhaps her coming to terms with the progression of life. Like the fish, she can live in freedom. Her life is not encapsulated in a “locket of ice” but she lives in “wavery memory,” the freedom to live in the moments of her everyday life, and in the recollection of her knickknacks, inducing nostalgia from her

youth. As she gets closer to remembering the name of the boy, she goes on to define the name given to her, Beulah, as “Promise, then / Desert-in-Peace.” Defining her name leads to her remembering the name that defined a precious memory for her, and the tree at the end of the fourth stanza symbolically suggests the sense of security that Beulah now feels as opposed to the end of the poem. Through the act of dusting in her home, Beulah no longer seeks shade, but is content and finds peace within the “wilderness” of her everyday life. In this poem, Dove’s usage of the simple domestic act of dusting in relation to the memory of her youth, works to display the universal experience of growing older and coming to terms with the transient nature of one’s own memory.

Beulah’s domestic space becomes a refuge for her to exist outside of it. Righelato notes that “as a poet, Dove is intrigued by the ways in which the imagination inhabits defined spaces within a house, differentiates between outside and inside, and creates zones of comfort and security” (96). When in her home, it often becomes the vehicle to exist outside of the confounds of her expected role, similar to what Dove does within the realm of Black poetry. Creating “a room of one’s own” as Virginia Woolf exclaims, could be what Dove and her protagonists do within the narrow constraints in which they inhabit, as woman and poet; this sentiment is deeply expressed in “Weathering Out.” In this piece, Beulah finds refuge within the solitude of her home. With Thomas in search of employment, she “floated from room to room, houseshoes flapping, / navigating corners in wonder” (56). The poem alludes to the sentiments expressed by many women writers such as aforementioned Virginia Woolf and Eavan Boland. Boland’s the journey illustrates a woman in a moment of solitude experiencing a dreamlike trance into the privacy of an imaginative inner life. Unlike Boland’s speaker who is “nearly sleep, not

dreaming really / but as ready to believe” (25-26), there is no hint of Beulah eventually being able to exist in a liminal space it is Black and white for her.

Past the seventh month she couldn't see her feet  
 so she floated from room to room, houseshoes flapping,  
 navigating corners in wonder. When she leaned  
 against a door jamb to yawn, she disappeared entirely. (56)

Her newfound motherhood leaves her unable to see her feet, removing her sense of agency. She floats from “room to room, houseshoes flapping” still reminding her of inhabited space. When she goes to yawn, she must disappear entirely into this space. In this imaginative space, there is no mythic Sappho to guide her. Sappho is separated from the women by “the melancholy river / the dream water, the narcotic crossing” but they are able to cross over it and “its cold persuasions” (74-76). However, Beulah becomes the “large and placid” lake. The escape that she uses to escape the domestic realm remind her of boundaries that cannot give her a room of her own. She must go from room to room, and like Dove, must inhabit multiple social spaces, even if they are within herself.

This sentiment rings true in “Daystar,” as Beulah now becomes “pure nothing in the middle of the day” (61). Beulah

wanted a little room for thinking:  
 but she saw diapers steaming on the line,  
 a doll slumped behind the door. (61)

Her domestic space is defined now not only by her race, her marriage to Thomas, but by her children and motherly duties. Like the speaker in “The Journey,” it is in darkness that they no longer see the “doll slumped behind the door” (61) and the “teddy bears and rag

dolls and tricycles and buckets” (Boland 68); Beulah is now able to see “her own vivid blood” her own being apart from work. This recurring imagined space is mythic in nature, and Dove, like Sappho is urging “do not define these women by their work” (Boland 58). In doing so, Dove makes a powerful statement about herself and her contemporaries: her work cannot be used to define her, especially regarding her authenticity to her race.

Another poem in the collection, “Wingfoot Lake” depicts Beulah in another space with her family. This poem depicts the memory of Beulah as she tries to cope with not only her husband’s absence, but her inability to cope with the progression of the times, as segregation and the March on Washington seem to clash with the stagnant place that she finds herself in. The poem takes place on Independence Day of 1964. It begins, however, with Beulah’s recollection of her 36th birthday and the recollection of the first swimming pool that her husband Thomas gifted her:

On her 36th birthday, Thomas has shown her  
 her first swimming pool. It had been  
 his favorite color, exactly — just  
 so much of it, the swimmers’ white arms jutting  
 into the chevrons of high society. (1-5)

Beulah frames her memory in third person, and this works to separate past self from her present and possibly future self. The recurring imagery of water is present in the poem like that of “Dusting.” However, the pool itself serves as a symbol for the context that they are in. The setting of this poem is ten years after the Brown v. BOE case, which ended segregation. In the context of this poem, perhaps Beulah has not had much

opportunity to experience swimming in a swimming pool. This sweet memory is juxtaposed to the harsh reality of the “swimmers’ white arms jutting / into the chevrons of high society.” This metaphor works to reinforce the sense of displacement that Beulah feels as she rolls up her window and urges Thomas to “drive on, fast” (7). Her urgency in moving forward is contradicted by her daughters “dragging her to their husbands’ company picnic” (10). The promotion of danger that Beulah feels entering this space that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable for her urges her to think about a past memory. The way that Dove describes the unity between the separated groups of white and Black families through the “same squeeze bottles of Heinz, the same / waxy beef patties and Salem potato chip bags” (12-15) emphasizes this human experience that is felt by the transformation of history. Food, typically a symbol of unity, of vulnerability, now serves the only sense of unity between the self-segregated groups. In this uncomfortable moment, Beulah recounts how “ten years ago / had been harder” (15-16), and Dove compares the daughters to young horses through a simile. The imagery of young horses suggests a sense of unrestrained freedom. The girls are inspired by the “crow’s wing” that “moved slowly through / the white streets of government” (21-22). In this stanza, the motifs of water and domestic space are reintroduced. In her first integrated experience, Beulah retreats to memories that were also firsts: the memory of Thomas being “dead for the first time / on Fourth of July — ten years ago” (14-15), and then last August, she “stood alone for hours / in front of the T.V. set.” In the safe space of her home, she now feels alone, as she sees the progression of the future unfold before her. Her acknowledgement of this as “brave swimming” (23) ties itself to the white swimmers at the beginning of the poem. In the way that she senses danger upon swimming through

this motif, it is suggested that in this moment she feels danger. However, there is a lack of any mention to move forward. Beulah lacks the ability and perspective to see the future, which is supported by the lack of any mention of the future and only of past events within the poem. As her daughter declares their status as “Afro-Americans now,” the speaker asks “What did she know about Africa?” Her confidence rests in her identity through memory and history, which is static. For Beulah, the present and future offer a permeable sense of self, not only of herself, but of her family without her husband, of her community due to integration, and now of her own race. Beulah must acknowledge her present self, and this self-questioning is mirrored in the rhetorical question, “What did she know about Africa?,” posing almost as “What did Beulah know about herself”? As she works through uncovering what it could possibly mean to be Afro-American, water imagery of lakes and “Thomas’ Great Mississippi” is reintroduced, emphasizing the anxiety she has over being faced with redefining her identity. Near the conclusion of the poem, Beulah is able to come to terms with her sense of self, as the speaker declares “Where she came from / was the past, 12 miles into town / where nobody had locked their back door” (32-34). The back door being unlocked metaphorically and literally presents the security in identity that Beulah feels as she reminisces over past spaces defined as home and the intimidation that she feels by a future in which she does not really know. The overall tone of this piece is contemplative, and the relationship between Beulah’s memories and her domestic space tells more about Beulah’s character than the present act of her and her daughters at the picnic.

The final poem also written in *Canary in Bloom*, “The Oriental Ballerina” in which Dove depicts Beulah’s final moments of life, as she examines the inside of her

home from her bed-ridden state and the dancing figurine of a ballerina on top of a jewelry box. The title and the first line of the poem are fragmented, but are part of one united sentence

The Oriental Ballerina

twirls on the tips of a carnation

while the radio scratches out a morning hymn. (75)

The personification of the ballerina and the radio present an agency that the domestic space around Beulah now has over her, reversing the role of housewife and caretaker of her home that has defined her throughout her life. In her final moments of life, the walls are now “dark, shadowed with the ghosts of oversized gardenias” (75). The flowers such as the canary in bloom in “Dusting” now have negative connotations, as they are “vulgar,” “drifting,” and “ragged.” The imagery of the dying flowers parallels the dying Beulah in her bedroom. As she examines what she believes she knows of the history of the ballerina and China, we see the elements of her bedroom as “cracked imitation walnut veneer” and the windows becoming “suddenly opaque.” The ballerina serves as a symbol of youth, and her dance works to illustrate “a cruel parody of the searching for beauty and grace” (Rigahelto 103). As the ballerina reaches the end of her tunnel, it suggests the end of Beulah’s life, her coming to terms with her limited knowledge of the world as she realizes, “There is no China; / no cross, just the papery kiss / of a kleenex above the stink of camphor” (77). For Beulah, she is forced to reconcile her final moments in the present defining features of her surroundings. Her recollection of the ballerina is limited in historical knowledge, and her opaque windows and inability for her pillow to see gives

closure to Beulah — she no longer must recall memories, as she becomes one in her death.

The narrative poems of *Thomas and Beulah* illustrate the ways in which Thomas and Beulah's homes span across cultural, social, and historical forces, despite how race narrows their range of options. Malin Pereira, in her chapter on "Thomas and Beulah" in "Rita Dove's Cosmopolitanism," articulates how the "vehicles of connection and freedom also reveal the cages that surround Thomas and Beulah" (108). If Dove is writing her way back home, reclaiming creative terrain for her and her contemporaries, it is through the inclusivity of experiences shared by women struggling to find their identities within the home. These women no longer remain silenced by stereotype, by obsession of Black essentialism, instead they can "chant, stamping their feet in wooden cadences," moving towards the agency of "brown paper wings" (12). As Steffen indicates, "their ethnic self-esteem no longer needs the mimicry of 'yellow half-shadows'. The new generation longs for complete artistic freedom" (74). Thomas and Beulah are not reduced by limits placed upon them; they transcend their domestic space. Dove moves beyond racial limen and stasis for her literary predecessors to follow.

## Expanding Blackness through Music and Lyric:

### *Grace Notes and Sonata Mulattica*

Like the Canary in Bloom, Dove's musicality dances throughout Dove's work and personal life, just as much as her literary prowess. Being a classically trained musician, she has a high awareness of the complexities of dance and song. Steven Rainer remarks that the musicality of Dove's prose, "wails like a jazz riff, soars like a gospel choir, and simmers with a classical elegance" (200). It is in this musicality that Dove gracefully cultivates the African American experience outside of genres conventionally associated with Black poetry such as jazz, blues, and reggae. Her poetic form is much like an unfinished song, an intentional act on Dove's behalf. In an interview with Steven Rainer, Dove discussed growing into her more serious writing, and how her mistaken notion of writing linearly slowed her progress. She proves that her life and her writing is "more akin to how our minds work... a thousand different details at once" (216). Music functions in the same manner, resisting the reader's desire for order and completion through the context of poetic form and race. *Grace Notes*, published three years after *Thomas and Beulah* narrates an umbrella of intimate concerns, relating to political climate and historical narrative. The title carries a glaring connection to music; in music, grace notes are those not essential to the basic melody or harmony, but as ornamentation that eloquently accentuate the note or lyrical moment. Shifting the perspective from the immersion in the past, *Grace Notes* begins in return to the world of Thomas and Beulah, setting its first poem "Summit Beach, 1921" as a historical marker, gauging the

“possibilities for young Black American women sixty years on from the conditions of the 1920s” (112). Rita Dove notes in an interview with Helen Vendler that

With *Grace Notes* I had several things in mind: every possible meaning of grace, and of notes, and of grace notes, and a little added riff. In a sense, I am trying to counter the heavy weight of *Thomas and Beulah*. (112)

From the collection’s opening, Dove illustrates how the Black adolescent must dance to similar rhythms and desires as those sixty years beyond her did. The musicality that exists within *Thomas and Beulah* still resonates in *Grace Notes*, personifying the beach through color and movement as being “Negro” and having “jumped to the twitch / of an oil drum tattoo and a mandolin” (3). This girl becomes subservient to her scarred knee, preventing her from dancing, the girl must observe in stasis. Her agency is confined to the commands and actions of men, such as her papa telling her “don’t be so fast” (3) and the act of “when the right man smiled” (3). It is only when this man smiles that she can feel “music skittering up her calf” again. Her agency from adolescence is defined by what the men around her say or do. Her desire for freedom is illustrated as “invisible wings” (3). Undefined by color, her desire transcends beyond the necessity of needing to be brown like the shoulders on the beach; she just wants to fly. It becomes Dove herself who resides in this emotional subspace, with “her parasol and invisible wings” into graceful structure of poems that follow “Summit Beach, 1921.”

“Hully Gully” links back to “Summit Beach, 1921” in terms of time. Like the young adolescent girl, grandmothers find themselves using music as a vehicle to escape the confinement of their home lives:

Locked in bathrooms for hours,

daydreaming in kitchens  
 as they leaned their elbows  
 into the shells of lemons (14)

As they lean into the primary melody of their domestic lives, it is the act of music, of humming “Hully Gully,” that embellishes their daily lives. It is not only their daily lives that are affected, but the summer has a generational impact on the family, as “geraniums / rocked the grandmothers to sleep” (14), “daughters [float] above the rocks of bobby socks,” (14) and “fathers worked swing shift,” and “wives straighten oval photographs” (14). These daily actions become embellished by the tune of women in the kitchen humming “Hully Gully”; the beat becomes invisible; it is not Black or brown beat because it permeates outside of boundaries that the family are already placed within.

“After Storm” portrays a shift in the poetic cycle, being the second poem in a creation-story like collection of poems. The inclusion of music is valuable to the understanding of the poem, in that it portrays music as essential to the very beginning of creation. Where “splintery arpeggios” (24) ring throughout this work, “The Wake” acts as an antecedent to this poem, as silence — the absence of music — becomes the presence that fills the poem. The absence personified as silence is covered with the mourning of the narrator’s family members. The absence of sound stemming from the narrator’s father-in-law is like an uninvited guest,

Friends and relatives  
 kept coming, trying  
 to fill up the house.  
 But the rooms still gaped — (33)

In the same way that the family tries to “cover / the silence with weeping” (33), the music in Dove’s own poetic voice is often covered by the narrative of not being “angry” or polemic enough. In her interview with Steven Ratiner, Dove discusses the humanity within music, and how in turn she writes in ways that expand the purview of Black women writers, such as through the motif of music. To Dove, “being human is precisely this push and pull, this ambivalence” (178). This push and pull experience is reflected in her lyricism. As the children in “Horse and Tree” say, “there is music and then it stops; / the beautiful is always rising and falling” (39); the universal human experience of music within itself transcends the boundaries of typecasting.

Dove notes in her interview with Camille Dungy, that *Grace Notes* appeals to “the ‘small people,’ ‘the nobodies in the course of history’” (122). It is not only in poetic form that Dove expresses musicality outside of constraints of Black poetry, as Dove explores uncovered facets of history in her seventh poetry collection, *Sonata Mulattica*. *Sonata Mulattica* uncovers the hidden account of George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower. Born an eighteenth-century violinist, Bridgetower, as Dove notes in her preface, was “son of a white mother and a self-styled ‘African prince,’ rose to his fifteen minutes of fame.” Though Bridgetower was positioned to be a prominent figure of music history, having Violina Sonata no. 9 in A major, opus 47 dedicated to him because he was the only “gran pazzo” or crazy genius skillful enough to play it. Unfortunately, an altercation between Beethoven and Bridgetower regarding a woman permanently severed ties between the two, resulting in the rededication of this piece, and exile of Bridgetower from the height of his musical career and the pinnacle of becoming a well-known name. Physical exile may occur following he and Beethoven quarrel, but Bridgetower’s identity as a young

Black violinist immediately others him in relation to his contemporaries. In present terms, Bridgetower continues to be excluded from a musical narrative that he deserves fair claim to. Dove reclaims historic space for Bridgetower to exist within that is indicative of the Black aesthetic and the universality of disadvantaged or unspoken stories. The historical narrative within *Sonata Mulattica*, serves as “a corrective to the notion that certain cultural forms are somehow the province of particular groups” (Lee).

The history behind Bridgetower and Beethoven’s tumultuous relationship is examined in the very first poem in the collection, “The Bridgetower”. This free verse poem is introduced with an epigraph that would have served as the dedication to Bridgetower: “per il Mulatto Brischdauer, gran pazzo e compositore mulattico” (19). The poem begins with hypotheticals surrounding Bridgetower’s appearance:

It was at the Beginning. If  
 he had been older, if he hadn’t been  
 dark, brown eyes ablaze  
 in that remarkable face. (19)

The capitalization of Beginning is indicative of the weight that Bridgetower’s first impression has for determining his fate. His dark skin and brown eyes are among the first traits of Bridgetower’s that Dove puts into question, but it is not first the color of his skin, but his age. In noticing this subtle detail, it restates a sentiment held by Dove in an interview with Charles Henry Rowell for *Callaloo*, as she declares,

It’s intriguing that a Black boy played classical violin in late eighteenth century Europe, but what’s thrilling is to realize that what amazed his audiences was that

he was already a great musician at such a young age—not that he was "Black" and played "white" music.

By illuminating these specific physical attributes, Dove carefully balances Bridgetower's race and humanity into one category. She reminds her audience to read Bridgetower without the inherent subsets that separates his race from his humanity. The first stanza of this poem sets up the fall of Bridgetower. His own gift leads to his inability "to grow up" (19). The second stanza parallels the first, as Dove holds Ludwig Beethoven up to the same light as Bridgetower. Like Bridgetower, his appearance holds great weight in his fate; but unlike him, it is the aesthetic appearance of his face as opposed to his skin. His social status and deafness are paralleled to Bridgetower's age and talent, with minimal context surrounding their doomed relationship. In doing so, Dove positions Bridgetower as an outsider in the same way that Beethoven's social status would isolate him. The fragility of fame is put against the "bright-skinned papa's boy" and his "fifteen-minute fame", bearing the same impossibility of "Black kids scratching out scales / on their matchbox violins" and of the sonata known as "The Bridgetower" (20).

If this collection is truly "a tale a light and shadow" (21) as she begins her "Prologue of the Rambling Sort", then Dove seeks to reflect that light not just on the shadow of Bridgetower's story, but on the shadow of racism that resonates throughout the text. Dove places other historical events and figures to form the background of the text, such as Billy Waters. In her poem "Black Billy Waters, at His Pitch", Dove's use of tercets and triplets creates a musicality to the story of Billy Waters that constructs history as song.

All men are beggars, white or Black;  
 some worship gold, some peddle brass.

My only house is on my back. (67)

Dove's use of first person gives Waters the agency to tell his story. Waters plays his fiddle to stay on track, ultimately creating the form of the poem. The chance rhyme between "Black" and "back" permeates the poem and echoes the role of slavery that is unmistakably present. The "house" on his back illustrates the depth of homelessness and the historic weight of whip lashes to a slave back. As this refrain is repeated throughout the poem, its rhyme is interrupted only when Water himself interjects:

Crippled as a crab, sugary as sassafras:

I'm Black Billy Waters, and you can kiss my sweet ass!

My only house weighs on my back. (67)

Though beggary is a condition that affects all men, "white or Black" as Waters proclaims, his interjection mirrors the same racial inequality that befalls Bridgetower. The slavery "of all kinds" (21) fights against the liberation of music that Bridgetower and Waters pursue and ultimately fail to attain.

*Sonata Mulattica* fills once-silent Black narratives into the realm of music. The subject matter of Bridgetower's life as a young, Black violinist is further illuminated by Dove's musical theme, rhyme, and meter. Dove's musicality and lyrical narrative within *Grace Notes* and *Sonata Mulattica* fight the displacement of the Black poet within human space. Rita Dove employs the musicality of her prose, not only limiting it to African American motifs, but crossing racial expanses that liberate her from predetermined typecasting.

## Reclaiming Black Narrative through Ballroom Dancing:

### *American Smooth*

Musicality takes the form of movement in Dove's personal life and in her poetry. A classically trained ballroom dancer, Dove exemplifies the movement of dance within her poems. Willard Spiegelman in his critical essay, "Rita Dove, Dancing", examines the role of dance in relation to Dove's poetry. Particularly in *American Smooth*, Spiegelman writes that, "Just as Dove's individual dance poems tacitly make us listen for a verbal music appropriate to the music of the ballroom, so all of the poems require us to make sense of their relation to one another" (232). Dove writes beyond the comparison of her poems to one another; she writes, with concise urgency, the collective of the human experience within all identity, be it cultural, racial, historical, or personal. If poetry functions as dance to Dove, then she writes to express experience beyond the surface of genre, her race, and her gender. Dove employs dance to remove the masks that stereotypes place on writers, specifically the Black poet.

In African American culture, dance resonates as an activity that heals, speaks, and unites among social groups. Dove notes in conversation with Robert McDowell, that in her upbringing "everybody was expected to know how to dance, which usually meant hand-dancing... as well as whatever new dances came along on the R&B scene" (McDowell). Dance speaks among many cultures in this way. The genre of ballroom dance has an extensive history surrounding its roots but has been commodified and rarified to a point that alienates it from its function to connect. Ballroom dancing is now popularized as a form of elevated dance, belonging to the upper class, and thus bears a

mediocre sense of its authentic origin. Dove's *American Smooth* refers to a type of ballroom dancing, a "jazzier American version of fox trots, tango, and waltzes" (Dungy 1027). Dove notes that American smooth is a more African American version of such dance, making it a language of the culture in its own way. This serves as a metaphor for her book, she "the idea of taking whatever you're handed... and making it your own" (Dungy 1027). Dove employs American smooth and other forms of ballroom dance in this collection to carve out a space for it to safely exist within the genre of Black poetry. If poetry functions as "a cage whose walls [one] must work against" (Mother Love), ballroom dance within *American Smooth* seeks to expand those walls and seek a sense of liberation within poetic space.

Its title stemming from a Nat King Cole's songs, "Fox Trot Fridays" is among the first poems from Dove's own personal experience with dancing. The seventeen-line poem is written in eight couplets and concludes with a single line, emulating the rhythmic motion of the Foxtrot dance. The poem's diction also emulates the fast, rhythmic "stride brush stride / quick-quick with a / heel-ball-toe" (19) movements that make up the dance. While the poem carries its weight by literally evoking the form of the dance, Dove's allusion to Nat King Cole's "slow satin smile" reflects the dance's ability to transport its participants away from the moment they are in. The alliteration used to describe Cole's smile echoes the tranquil, smooth tone of the poem, juxtaposing itself from the dance of the fox trot and the grief that fox trot Fridays allows escape from. Nat King Cole's smile insert a reminder of Dove's sentiment of American Smooth, and African American repurposing of ballroom dance, as Cole does with the fox trot. Following this allusion is

the monosyllabic quickening of the couple as they continue their dance, united as “one man and / one woman” (19).

Another poem in the collection, “Brown”, is a stark contrast in form and content. It does not emulate a ballroom dance but visualizes the conditions of being the sole representative of one’s race during dress shopping. The tone of this poem is defiant, providing a glimpse of Dove’s five-alarm rage that can be potentially overlooked to a superficial eye. The poem begins with her gurgling, “Why you look good in every color!” (23) The narrator’s immediate response to that is to demure. The context of this word refers to modesty, particularly that of a woman’s behavior. The narrator’s response of demurring implies a desire to under-saturate herself, including her color that alienates her. The poem’s title sets the focus on color and its implications for both the narrator and Dove regarding race. The narrator states meticulously that, “For once I was not the only / Black person in the room” (23). The enjambment between the two lines emphasizes the isolation in being “the only” Black person within the country club. Though she is not the only Black person, the succeeding line, “(two others, both male),” shows that an isolation that can only be felt being the only Black woman in the room. This mirrors sentiments that Dove holds as a Black woman and poet. In her interview with Camille Dungy, she discusses her own experience stating, “As a Black woman, from a very early age I was acutely aware of the discrepancies between history as I experienced it and history as it was reported” (1028). Illuminating facets of history as she experienced them gives voice to the silenced and disenfranchised; that voice is narrated in the first person throughout the collection. At the end of “Brown,” the recoiled energy of the narrator bites at the “difference” her skin causes “whenever [she] walk[s] into a polite space” (23). The

imagery of the dress in question being red illustrates the shift of the narrator's attitude, from that of a demurring to a striking sense of belonging of opposition to the "European constipated swoon" (24).

The concluding poem of the section, "Fox Trot Fridays," shares its title with the title of the collection. The ballroom dancing motifs of "American Smooth" portray the escapism and disguise that the dance provides. Dove employs juxtaposition between two dancers and the relationship between the performance of the dance and her appearance to an audience. The poem does not break into multiple stanzas, its form parallels the couple as the dance "into the next song without / stopping" (39). As they perform, the narrator divulges how this dance that Dove prefaces her book by describing it as, "A form of ballroom dancing... in which the partners are free to release... permitting improvisation and individual expression" (7), actually functions as

—such perfect agony  
 one learns to smile through,  
 ecstatic mimicry  
 being the sine qua non  
 of American Smooth. (39)

This juxtaposition between Dove's outward definition of the dance and the narrator's inner struggle as she performs it reveals the rampant commodification of ballroom dance that eliminates self-expression. If music functions specifically to African Americans throughout the collection as "the expression of their spirit, energizing and restorative in the face of racism in their own culture" (Righaletto 210), then Dove reveals how its commodification silences such expression for performative gain. Dove shares that dance

within her work and specifically in this collection illuminates the sentiment of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask." She delineates that "the gazes I must navigate through will register me as symbol first" (McDowell). The commodification of Black experiences and but fights against it through the reclamation of her own song. It is only in found in reconnecting with her dance partner that they achieve "flight. / that swift and serene / magnificence" (40). This imagery illustrates a poignant relationship between Dove and her own work, just as the dancer feels constrained in her task to perform, Dove at one point in her literary career felt "'constrained' by what [she] thought was expected of [her] in terms of [her] Blackness." (Alexander).

Dove's use of dance throughout the work echoes the implications of color and exclusion. Found in titles such as "Brown," "Chocolate," "Not Welcome Here," and "I have been a stranger in a strange land," Dove depicts color-based biases that reveal painful aspects of American and African American history. Dance as a means of expression is often threatened by the codes of professionalism and commodification, excluding the Black and brown voices that give it form. Dove reclaims these voices in each section of this collection, from the African American soldiers during the First World War to the only Black woman in the room preparing to waltz.

## Moving Beyond the Commodification of Blackness

### Conclusion

The issue of categorization presents a challenge to a writer such as Rita Dove. In her pursuits to illuminate the fullness of African American history and her own personal narrative, while dismantling the boundaries that silence both, she becomes placed within such constraints or rejected for not writing safely within them. As a result, Dove has received criticism regarding the authenticity of her race within the context of her poetry. Houston Baker begins his review of *Grace Notes* declaratively:

Rita Dove is not a "Race Poet." It is virtually impossible to imagine her saying in unison with W. E. B. Du Bois: "I don't give a damn for any art that is not propaganda." And it is a signal irony of United States "culture" that Dove has only one essentialist category to house her in the popular critical imagination.

That category, of course, is 'Afro-American' or 'Black' poet. (Baker 574)

Though, Dove does not share the militant voice of her contemporaries, her work is all but safe." In challenging the purview of the genre, Dove pushes back against the idea that there is a legitimate way of performing Blackness. Inherently, to be criticized on not writing about Black topics or interests implies Blackness as a performance art instead of it as a lens that covers the human experiences we face. In an interview with Steven Ratiner, he shares the opinion of an anonymous poet that "Dove's poetry can be accepted comfortably by white academic society because she doesn't have the edge, the raw angry passion of a poet like Ai." (184) Dove replies that she does in fact have that anger and edge and it is resonated through her expansion of what can be written on within the genre.

Dove often expresses her timidity as an early writer due to not feeling “Black” enough:

I wrote poems, but I did not try to publish for several years, because I was afraid I was going to be told my writing wasn't "Black" enough. I think that until I could accept my life as legitimate—that it did not have to conform to anyone's program—I did not feel confident enough to send my work out. (Alexander)

Thus, Dove’s literary oeuvre is the fruition of her acceptance of her life as legitimate. Does nonconformity beget disloyalty when it comes to race? For Dove, her work is a means of erasing the desire for conformity entirely; to typecast artists into a scope of topics is to limit the scope of the subjects that Black poets can write about. This otherness, to Dove, is writing about the experiences of African Americans within varying social, historical, and cultural milieus. The inherent need for a text to fall within the “socially sanctioned protocols of traditional Black literature” as a means of measuring the author’s authenticity of Blackness creates repression on a movement created to foster artistic freedom.

In Therese Steffen’s chapter, “In Conversation with Rita Dove,” Dove expounds on the otherness that she writes conversely to:

It was necessary at one time to underscore that otherness in order to get any kind of respect whatsoever, but the insistence on difference also requires one to erect certain walls or obey certain rules, all of which is anathema to the artist. (169)

Rita Dove thus, breaks the boundaries of Black poetry that have become debilitating typecasts to one’s creative outlook. Dove expounds the parameters of which Black poetry can exist in. Her defiance has created works that shed light on the “universal in [our]

differences” (Steffen 177). Rita Dove’s employment of topics that are outside of the African American poetic canon reflects her ability as a poet to move beyond simplistic and derivative cultural expectations. Writing across these boundaries, Dove extends the line for Black stories that are silenced or unrecognized to be acknowledge, celebrated, and validated, thus widening the literary bounds for Black artists to write about their unique racial experiences.

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