

Liminality and Otherness: Exploring Transcultural Space in Rita Dove's *The Yellow House on the Corner*

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Abstract

This paper studies postcolonial responses to prescriptive racial affiliations in contemporary America, tracing the transition of 'race' from a biological to a sociocultural concept, and the related rejection of modernist binaries in African American writing after the 1970s. In particular, African American writer, Rita Dove's first collection of poems, *The Yellow House on the Corner*² published in 1980, deconstructs race as a dynamic construct encoded in linguistic and cultural signifiers that turned ethnocentrism into a hegemonic tool rejected by poets writing towards the end of the twentieth century. Positing that Dove's travels through Europe provide for a cultural and linguistic sensibility that is liminal in its repudiation of cultural absolutism, the paper argues that her writing foreshadows Hollinger's 'postethnic' decentring of race through formulating non-prescriptive affiliations that transcend the colour line. Foregrounding history as a personal, transcultural space where frames of memory are juxtaposed to reveal the constructed nature of racially informed identities and affiliations, the poems create what Steffen terms 'artistic enspacement', exhibiting a post-black sensibility that revisits race, memory and history as racialised psycho-spatial domains, and celebrating the fluid nature of identity construction as a journey that must deconstruct race through a transatlantic crossing-over into the domain of the white to reclaim its share in history.

This paper studies postcolonial responses to prescriptive racial affiliations in contemporary America, especially the responses to the transition of 'race' from a biological to a sociocultural concept, as well as the related rejection of modernist binaries in African American writing after the 1970s.¹ In particular, African American writer, Rita Dove's first collection of poems, *The Yellow House on the Corner*² published in 1980, deconstructs race as a dynamic construct encoded in linguistic and cultural signifiers that turned ethnocentrism into a hegemonic tool rejected by poets writing towards the end of the twentieth century. Dove is conscious of structural modes of representation that build on modernist binaries, having transcended the protocols of Black nationalist writing in place when she began writing and countered the representation of history as a racialised domain in collective memory. Her poems counter the linearity of historical frames through metaphor and imagery, initiating a crossing-over into the psycho-spatial domain of the Other to explore objectification and identity in a transatlantic journey that is both real and metaphorical.

¹ Rita Dove, *The Yellow House* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon UP, 1980). Henceforth to be referred as *YHC*.

W.E.B. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, talked of race as a ‘social construct’, saying that ‘the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line’.² African American writing traditionally exhibited traits of Du Boisian ‘double consciousness’, ‘two warring souls in one dark body’,³ where the linearity of the gaze subscribed to the traditional notion of trapping imagery within the binaries of black/white, us/them, centre/margin, looking out from the white centre, as it were, at the fringes. In the 1990s, both Paul Gilroy and David A. Hollinger realised that this dichotomous framing of the past prevented inter-racial connections being formed, with identities having to adhere to prescriptive ethno-racial labels. While Gilroy rejected ‘absolutist conceptions of cultural difference allied to a culturalist understanding of “race” and ethnicity’, stressing ‘ties of affiliation and affect which articulated the discontinuous histories of black settlers in the new world’,⁴ Hollinger suggested postethnicity as a way to accept the realities of a multicultural society made more complex by the legacy of slavery and miscegenation, and posited that the term ‘identity’, which was static, implying what he called ‘fixity and givenness’, be replaced by voluntary ‘affiliations’,⁵ which would take into account both the legacy of the past as well as the postmodern fluidity of existence in the present. Both critics stressed the need to rethink modernity in terms of hybridity of culture and ethnicity.

A rejection of modernist binaries and a formulation of postethnic affiliations demanded a process of the recognition of gaps between fixed notions of truth and the historicity of modes of representation. Positing that Dove’s travels through Europe provide for a cultural and linguistic sensibility that is liminal in its repudiation of cultural absolutism, this study argues that her writing foreshadows a postethnic decentring of race through formulating non-prescriptive affiliations that transcend the colour line. Foregrounding history as a personal, transcultural space where frames of memory are juxtaposed to reveal the constructed nature of racially informed identities and affiliations, the poems create what Therese Steffen terms ‘artistic enspacement’.⁶ They exhibit a post-black sensibility that revisits race, memory and history as racialised psycho-spatial domains, and celebrate the fluid nature of identity construction as a journey that must deconstruct race through a transatlantic crossing-over into the domain of the white to reclaim its share in history. Dove’s own experiences in and of Europe have lent her work a metaphoric inclusiveness that causes Jerzy Kamionowski to term her a ‘cultural mulatto’,⁷ yet they remain grounded in black aesthetics enough for Helen Vendler to state that, ‘Dove shows blackness as an ever-present, unshedable first skin of consciousness’.⁸ Using history, myth and language, Dove bridges the two in her poems to effect a transatlantic crossing.

Growing up in a period characterised by the struggle for civil rights, Dove had as early examples the intense poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Langston Hughes. Subsequently, the

² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1994) 9.

³ W.E.B. Du Bois, ‘Strivings of the Negro People.’ *The Atlantic Monthly* 80.478 (1897) 194-98.

⁴ Paul Gilroy, ‘The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity,’ *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1993) 15-16.

⁵ David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 7.

⁶ Therese Steffen, *Crossing Colour: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove’s Poetry, Fiction and Drama* (Oxford UP, 2001) 28.

⁷ Jerzy Kamionowski, ‘Homeward Dove: Nomadism, “World”-Travelling, and Rita Dove’s Homecoming,’ *Crossroads. A Journal of English Studies* 3 (2013) 12.

⁸ Helen Vendler, ‘Rita Dove: Identity Markers’ *Callaloo* 17.2 (1994) 395.

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post-Civil Rights era saw an intense upsurge of pride in all things African. History subscribed to ethnocentric domains, placing the trauma of slavery and post-Emancipation discrimination at the centre of a teleological narrative. Poetry reflected the times, with poets like Gwendolyn Brooks and Nikki Giovanni engaging with the socioaesthetic awareness of the age. However, this emphasis on an ethnocentric identity only succeeded in a double marginalisation, paradoxically defining African Americans as outsiders to American history and culture. In 1972, Ishmael Reed wrote of this existence on the fringes, of being forever aware of a Du Boisian ‘double consciousness’:

i am outside of
history. i wish
i had some peanuts, it
looks hungry there in
its cage.

i am inside of
history. its
hungrier than i
thot.⁹

The 1960s and 1970s relied on ethnocentrism as an essential tool for survival. However, with second-generation African Americans who had not experienced firsthand the trauma of slavery, yet had seen the debilitating effects of segregation, identity was not marked by only the call to roots. Existing in a liminal space that still carried traces of the past, the need to separate from the white normative was complicated by an unconscious appropriation of white ideals, including a negation of miscegenation, both historical and cultural. Born of the idea that racial identity must adhere to the binary of pure/impure, it turned African American ethnocentrism into a hegemonic subscription to white ideals. The celebration of Blackness turned black identity into a closed domain wherein the celebration of difference – of ‘ancient, dusky rivers’¹⁰ (Hughes 1921) – reconnects the black man to the land from which he was taken into slavery, without a trace of historicity. Hughes stresses this by saying, ‘Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country.’¹¹ In stressing an ethnicity that traced its roots back to Africa, ethnocentrism not only gave credence to the concept of a homogeneous black identity that negated any trace of a white past, but also denied miscegenation to be a legacy of white practices. Consequently, it ‘hermetically sealed off’¹² black identity into a distant and imaginary past and made the black body the locus of its legacy. Arguing that double consciousness occurs when the white origins of African American identity

⁹ Ishmael Reed, ‘Dualism: in ralph ellison’s invisible man,’ *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* ed. Gates and McKay (1972) 2292.

¹⁰ Hughes, Langston, ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers,’ *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Eds. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. (Vintage, 1995) 23.

¹¹ Hughes qtd. in Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes – Vol II: 1941-1967: I Dream A World* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2002) 385.

¹² Gilroy 2.

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are repressed to stress ethnocentrism, Dove repudiates the Black nationalist protocols in place when she began writing.

Thus, stating that the emphasis on Blackness only legitimises the white normative through recognition of ethno-racial blocs and the one-drop rule, Dove seeks to counter the racialisation of memory in her poetry. Following Langston Hughes and James Baldwin, she demonstrates the realisation of history as a closed domain in her transatlantic travels. In an interview, she says, 'Serious travel can heighten the awareness a writer needs to see many sides of a story'.¹³ In Europe, Dove faces for the first time the significance of black skin as a colour code, as she is both objectified as the racial Other and made representative of all who had been enslaved. For the first time, she realises how her relatively prosperous position in American society has shielded her from being exposed to a systemic hierarchy coded into skin colour; at the same time, she gains insight into history as a domain of images aimed at accentuating difference. Europe makes her aware of the reality of double consciousness in a Eurocentric narrative and the fallacy of ethnocentrism as a comprehensive identity marker in a postethnic world. Her poetry exhibits a realisation that African Americans, in claiming a closed ethnocentric identity, had alienated themselves further from the centre. Following this, the poems revisit sites in history, repudiating black cultural nationalism in favour of the individual perspective.

In her first collection of poems, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, Dove experiments with a theory of racial positioning that is in a liminal space, strongly connected to its roots yet inclusive in its rejection of binaries. The poems express the need to assert identity as black-white, positing the untenable nature of modernist binaries in a postmodern world. The collection is divided into five sections, each a juxtaposition of the past and the present, each tracing race as it moves from the sphere of the overt to the symbolic, exploring what it means to be African American in the contemporary world. History and the legacy of slavery occupy central place in the memory in each visitation.

The first section in the collection initiates a transatlantic crossing-over as Dove borrows from Japanese and European myths. The first poem in this section, titled 'This Life',¹⁴ portrays awareness of objectification and of being 'black'. As she travels through Germany, Dove becomes increasingly aware of her own alienation as her identity becomes circumscribed by the colour of her skin, making her the representative of the suffering of slaves – 'the object of cultural stereotyping'.¹⁵ The poem juxtaposes myth and reality in a frame where the two converge to expose memory as constructed through imagery. The traveller who says, 'the possibilities/ are golden tresses in a nutshell' (5-6) soon comes face to face with reality, saying of herself, 'I a stranger/ in this desert, nursing the tough skins of figs' (17-19). Righelato says of Dove, 'As a writer she turns her own estrangement to account.'¹⁶ White and black converge to portray the unchanging nature of existence for the African American – 'Our lives will be the same' (14). Exploring these as cultural motifs, the poem traces the complex nature of the transatlantic crossing that defies labelling; portrayed as remaining on the surface, the connection

¹³ Earl G. Ingersoll, ed. *Conversations with Rita Dove* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi (2003) 77.

¹⁴ *YHC* 8

¹⁵ Pat Righelato, *Understanding Rita Dove* (South Carolina: U of South Carolina P (2006) 7.

¹⁶ Righelato 8.

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is superficial – ‘he had/ your face’ (13-14). The post-racial, just like the embodiment that cages African American identity in the colour of the skin, is but skin deep.

This awareness of the racialised nature of double consciousness leads Dove to explore the constructed nature of difference. The poems that follow this realisation deconstruct both European and African American history to expose trauma as a common area for both. In these poems, history functions as a symbolic spatio-temporal domain wherein trauma is neither black nor white, but a series of images. The images that inform memory at this point are deconstructed as traumatic on both sides of the Atlantic. The next poem in the collection, titled ‘The Bird Frau’,¹⁷ is a metaphoric conjoining of man and nature to emphasise the debilitating image of war as endless trauma:

She moved about the yard like an old rag bird.
Still at war, she rose at dawn, watching out
for Rudi, come home on crutches,
the thin legs balancing his atom of life. (20-23)

These images cannot be escaped even after effecting a crossing-over, both literal and metaphorical. The image of the old lady ‘still at war’ emphasises the perpetual images of war that live on in her memory and make peace delusionary, as Righelato observes: ‘her wildness marks her as ideologically still at war yet as having regressed to an asocial existence’.¹⁸ She exists in a trans-temporal zone where the past and present are indistinguishable. Righelato terms ‘the ambiguity of tenses’ a ‘poignant’ exercise in blurring the borders between imagination and reality.¹⁹

In exploring images of war, trauma as black and white is shown to be the result of associated codes that inform learned behaviour. In an earlier study, Roy and Ringo assert, ‘In the case of characteristics attributed to race, sensory stimuli function in the form of visual and linguistic codes that inform learned behaviour.’²⁰ The characters in Dove’s poems deliberate the dynamics of colour and its associated images in the memory by their racial ambiguity. By invoking historical trauma as universal, the poems deconstruct racialised frames of memory on the basis of what Gilroy terms the ‘central Manichean dynamic – black and white’. This ‘typically construct[s] the nation as a homogeneous object and invoke[s] ethnicity a second time in the hermeneutic procedures deployed to make sense of its distinctive cultural content’.²¹ In her exploration of this ‘cultural insiderism’²² that informs official history, Dove deconstructs images that subscribe to the hermeneutics of disjointed racialised frames to show historical trauma as common on both sides of the colour line.

¹⁷ YHC 9

¹⁸ Righelato 9.

¹⁹ Righelato 9.

²⁰ Lekha Roy and Rano Ringo, ‘Interrogating Racialized Perceptions in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*’, *Dialog* 29 (Spring 2016) 66.

²¹ Gilroy 1-3.

²² Gilroy 3.

The question of colour and its role in informing the identity of images is examined in Dove's next poem. 'Small Town'²³ builds on the unseen gaze that makes visible only 'the woman, indistinct, in the doorway' (3), while 'the man in the chestnut tree/ who wields the binoculars' (4-5) leaves the person inside the house without an identity. 'Someone is sitting in the red house./ There is no way of telling who it is' (1-2), says Dove, and the hegemonising nature of the gaze is stated in a clear demarcation of power: 'The man,/ whose form appears clearly among the leaves,/ is not looking at her/ so much as she at him' (14-17). The vantage point on the threshold is portrayed by the indistinct form of the woman in the doorway, and whether her presence serves to hide the person within or to give credence to the gaze without is a question that remains unanswered. The identity of both is masked, but its gendered form points to the possibility of the artist's form converging with that of the character in the poem.

Even as she deconstructs identity, Dove delves into the semiotics of historical configurations. The poem, ironically titled 'Sightseeing',²⁴ explores trauma as symbolised in myths, tracing its epistemic and linguistic origins to images in the memory. In visiting a church destroyed after the Allies bombed it, Dove talks about the impossibility of viewing history devoid of symbols. The temporal distancing of the present from the past lends the past symbolic meaning. She says,

Let's look
At the facts. Forget they are children of angels
and they become childish monsters.
Remember, and an arm gracefully upraised
is raised not in anger but a mockery of gesture. (23-27)

Inferring that history itself is a symbolic reconstruction that provides an escape from 'the vulgarity of life in exemplary size' (28-29), Dove then attempts to deconstruct the myths that prevent an objective view of the past. Her transatlantic travels have established history as racialised frames of signifiers that build on binaries. Having established trauma as a common space defining both African American and European memory, Dove shifts the focus to political leaders who dominate the frame of African American history. The next poem in the collection, titled 'Upon Meeting Don L. Lee in a Dream',²⁵ portrays the mythical Civil Rights leader as a figure whose stature is diminished as the myth surrounding him disintegrates. Her description of Lee is anything but reverent:

I can see caviar
Imbedded like buckshot between his teeth.
His hair falls out in clumps of burned-out wire.
The music grows like branches in the wind. (13-16)

²³ YHC 12

²⁴ YHC 14

²⁵ YHC 16

The poem not only deconstructs the myths that sustained the Civil Rights movement, but also seems to indicate the need to question the relevance of the ideals that sustained both the movement and black identity at the time. Righelato terms this ‘a significant artistic positioning for Dove as a young poet coming up against the established black ideology. In this early poem, Dove is separating herself from the exclusive celebration of blackness’.²⁶ The section then ends with two poems that exemplify contemporary poverty as a legacy of slavery for African Americans. The poems deconstruct the delusionary nature of the black man’s rights:

We six pile in, the engine churning ink:
We ride into the night.
Past factories, past graveyards
And the broken eyes of windows, we ride
Into the gray-green nigger night.

... In the nigger night, thick with the smell of cabbages,
Nothing can catch us.
Laughter spills like gin from glasses,
And “yeah” we whisper, “yeah”
We croon, “yeah.” (‘Nigger Song: An Odyssey’ 11-15)²⁷

Once the myth about the prominent Civil Rights leader and the legacy of the movement for African Americans has been dismantled, Dove analyses memory as a domain of select images that gain the force of truth over time. The next section in the collection examines memory as a closed domain conforming to racialised perspectives that filter all experience in the present. The first poem in the section, titled ‘Five Elephants’,²⁸ talks of the selective nature of the images that construct memory:

Five umbrellas, five
Willows, five bridges and their shadows!
They lift their trunks, hooking the sky
I would rush into, split

pod of quartz and lemon. I could say
they are five memories, but
that would be unfair.
Rather pebbles seeking refuge in the heart.
They move past me. I turn and follow,
and for hours we meet no one else. (7-16)

²⁶ Righelato 13.

²⁷ YHC 18

²⁸ YHC 20

Dove asserts that memory limits the experiential transcending of barriers. The metaphorical trunks of elephants ‘hooking the sky’ (9) permeate her sense that her African American identity is limited by the sociocultural normative. In an interview with Earl Ingersoll she observes, ‘times have changed, accelerated by great movers like Martin Luther King; and we have gone beyond the image of the cross and the metaphors of heavenly redemption.’²⁹ In the process, the constructed nature of identity formation is poignantly expressed through the image of a ‘split pod of quartz and lemon’, delineating the process by which a colourless gem is transformed into a coloured stone. This constructed identity then lodges in the heart the images that prevent its escape. In adopting the white man’s religion, the black man looked for redemption from suffering, but the cultural force of the images it carried made it a potent tool for hegemony: ‘In their despair they found metaphors for their suffering, and metaphors for transcending suffering, for spiritual survival, in the tales from the very book their oppressors cherished for the opposite reasons.’³⁰ As ‘pebbles in the heart’, they lead to more suffering, wherein ‘each funeral parlour/ is more elaborate than the last’ (‘Teach Us to Number Our Days’ 1-2).³¹

The poem, ‘Geometry’,³² sets the writer free of such constrictions. In a meticulous and exact description of the mathematics of comprehension, Dove contends that the mere realisation of the presence of systemically structured norms that inform images that in turn construe memory as distinct frames opens up a transcultural space that is heterotopic in nature. She says,

I prove a theorem and the house expands:
the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling,
the ceiling floats away with a sigh.

As the walls clear themselves of everything
but transparency, the scent of carnations
leaves with them. I am out in the open ... (1-7)

What is noticeable is that Dove’s characters do not break free of the old mould; rather, the mould itself expands, metamorphosing, as it were, to include the changing contours of reality. Winant says that the acceptance of race as ‘a central signifier’ legitimises binaries that build on difference. He says,

Race generates an “inside” and an “outside” of society, and mediates the unclear border between these zones; all social space, from the territory of the intrapsychic to that of the U.S. “national character” is fair game for racial dilemmas, doubts, fears, and desires.³³

Thus, a decentring of race would necessitate a dismantling of the images that make up memory, a process that would need the dimensions of the mind itself to expand to incorporate the inside-

²⁹ Ingersoll 78.

³⁰ Ingersoll 78.

³¹ *YHC* 17

³² *YHC* 21

³³ Howard Winant, *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparisons* (U of Minnesota P, 2002) 30.

outside, the black-white. The concluding lines of the poem 'Geometry' corroborate this by a metaphoric unstructuring of the ceiling to effect a change in perspectives; in the poem, these are symbolised by 'windows' which then turn into winged butterflies:

I am out in the open

and above the windows have hinged into butterflies,
sunlight glinting where they've intersected.

They are going to some point true and unproven. (6-9)

The fact that the windows do not transform themselves but expand to free the speaker emphasises the central argument about memory freeing itself of racialised filters that wall in perception. The liminal nature of the space created frees the journey of utopian expectations, the destination 'true' yet 'unproven'.

A change in perception would need a realisation of the historicity of images that influence it. Hollinger, in proposing postethnicity as a way to build affiliations across the colour line, talks of the growing acceptance of historicity, that is, 'the contingent, temporally, and socially situated character of our beliefs and values, of our institutions and practices'.³⁴ Dove's poems act as the praxis to Hollinger's theory, examining closely the myths and beliefs that live on as larger-than-life truths in the memory, preventing emotional distancing. In *YHC*, she posits travelling as a way towards this distancing. As 'the ceiling floats away' in the memory, Dove revisits slavery and historical trauma without racialised filters. Each poem in this section deals with individual lives affected by slavery. The use of colloquialism in 'Belinda's Petition'³⁵ combined with an emphasis on historical authenticity in 'The Transport of Slaves from Maryland to Mississippi'³⁶ brings to the fore individual consciousnesses buried in the metanarrative of disjunctive frames of collective memory. Vendler talks of Dove's 'willingness to make her readers uneasy', yet ascribes to her poetry a 'wish to achieve historical linguistic probability'.³⁷ In terming her poetry 'relatively unsuccessful historical excursions in a lyric time-machine',³⁸ however, she misses the pattern that does not aim for historical accuracy or lyrical perfection, but uses both to light up memory built through images that are perspectival. In the space opened up by the ceiling having floated away, the contemporary reader revisits individual lives traumatised by slavery. Freed of the racialised filters that enclose the narrative in racialised domains, history is deconstructed as a narrative perpetuated by imagery.

The deconstruction of the historical metanarrative in the third section posits independence as a myth. It traces the life of a slave, and the drudgery is contrasted with the freedom in which the white master and mistress luxuriate: 'and as the fields unfold to whiteness,/ and they spill like bees among the fat flowers,/ I weep. It is not yet daylight' ('The House Slave',

³⁴ Hollinger 60.

³⁵ *YHC* 32

³⁶ *YHC* 37

³⁷ Vendler 66.

³⁸ Vendler 66.

13-15).³⁹ Later, in the poem ‘The Transport of Slaves from Maryland to Mississippi’,⁴⁰ Dove traces the struggle for Emancipation, and the brutality that marked the period, critiquing nineteenth-century Reason for its justification of slavery. In the poem ‘The Slave’s Critique of Practical Reason’,⁴¹ the slave ponders his reasons for running away, and ironically finds none:

Ain’t got a reason
to run away –
leastways, not one
would save my life.
So I scoop speculation
into a hopsack. (1-6)

In critiquing Reason, Dove revisits the original Black aesthetic that concluded with Henson’s (un)reasoning: ‘I had never dreamed of running away. I had a sentiment of honor on the subject’ (166).⁴² Dove’s use of black colloquial language along with a word like ‘speculation’, denoting the black man as a thinking individual, deconstructs the hegemonising nature of Whiteness that reduces the black man to naught but ‘the Owl/ of the Broken Spirit’ (18-19). Righelato observes, ‘This is also a historicist enterprise, an active shaping of the poet’s own modern consciousness to find through these ghostly predecessors a viable contemporary African American identity’.⁴³

However, in a reconstitution of memory in the transcultural space created by an abandoning of racialised filters, the solipsistic nature of Whiteness cannot sustain itself for long. Dove posits that Whiteness is itself dependent on the Other for its existence, and once the slave is free of the master, the master will dissolve in his own isolated world. The poem titled ‘The Snow King’⁴⁴ talks of ‘white spaces’ (4) in ‘a far far land’ (1) where ‘lime filled spaces’ (9) are empty, bereft of ‘the night as soft as antelope’s eyes’ (7). It is a world of destruction, where the white psyche of the perpetrator of violence ‘cracked ... a slow fire, a garnet’ (10). In an image resonating of the burning fires of Hell, the poem reaffirms Toni Morrison’s assertion of the ‘Africanism’ that permeates white experience – even as the violence inflicted on the slave destroyed the white man’s heart, it gave him his pure identity.⁴⁵ It is a Hegelian resolution of the fallacy of the civilising notion of slavery.

Dove’s final aim in this journey is to define the power of linguistic forces where racialised formulations extend beyond the epistemic domain in which they were realised. Morrison says, ‘Literature redistributes and mutates in figurative language the social conventions

³⁹ *YHC* 33

⁴⁰ *YHC* 37

⁴¹ *YHC* 43

⁴² Josiah Henson, ‘Truth Stranger than Fiction.’ *Early Negro American Writers*, Ed. Benjamin Brawly (New York: Dover, 1970) 166.

⁴³ Righelato 23.

⁴⁴ *YHC* 13

⁴⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 65.

of Africanism'.⁴⁶ The final poem in Dove's collection speaks of language as a metaphorical journey that constructs reality as it progresses:

Sometimes
a word is found so right it trembles
at the slightest explanation.
You start out with one thing, end
up with another, and nothing's
like it used to be, not even the future. (17-22)

Thus, the poem and the collection end on a note of postmodern uncertainty. While offering the possibility of linguistic accuracy, it nevertheless stresses the constructed nature of narratives, and its ineffectual rendering of the past, or its reading of the future. The idea of the *trace* is negated, compounding meaning in the absence of a teleological sequence. The individual must forge his way through this linguistic (im)probability of a rendering of identity in a postethnic world.

In the quest for meaning, the collection stresses the recurring motif of the traveller, which dominates the symbolic setting free of the self from prescriptive domains of identity construction. The poems stress the quest for a new collective memory, forged through a revisiting of both black and white history, for the roots extend as much back into Europe as Africa. The journey to sites of trauma in the memory reformulates the relationship between the semantics of race and its associated images. This reformulation succeeds in breaking the link between racial identity and the historical associations that inform these images. However, the journey is liminal; Dove in no way posits the admission of the Other into this newly constructed transracial domain to be complete.

Post-Blackness stresses the liminal; Hollinger's theory of postethnicity presupposes an awareness of the structural networks that function to construct memory. As a 'fin-de-siècle artist on the threshold of a new millennium',⁴⁷ Dove initiates a journey into the psycho-spatial domain to admit the Other into this area, thus creating space for a dialogue wherein frames of memory can be juxtaposed. In the process, the forces that go into the making of these frames are analysed as constructs filtering experience. Most importantly, in foregrounding the individual, Dove gives force to Hollinger's contention that postethnicity must allow for a voluntary, individual crossing-over across boundaries of race. The process of facilitating this crossing-over must first revisit trauma and deconstruct the forces that constitute imagery as racialised. Dove follows Morrison and Walker in advocating a revisiting of traumatic wounds, but she goes further to suggest that the systemic structuring of these wounds supports systemic exploitation of slaves in the past and hinders healing in the present. She also stresses a need to counter modernist binaries that foster difference at the intrapsychic and social levels. Her first collection of poems initiates a journey that is liminal in this repudiation, existing at the threshold of a restructuring of racial identification with the past that her next collection formulates.

⁴⁶ Morrison 66.

⁴⁷ Steffen 20.

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