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Homeward Dove: Nomadism, "World"-Travelling, and Rita Dove's Homecoming(s)

Abstract: This article focuses on the question of changing landscapes in Rita Dove's poetry, and its strict connection with her redefinition of the identity and role of a black poet. A constant movement through various sceneries in terms of space, culture and intellectual concerns is a distinguishing feature of Dove's poetry. My analysis of her poems sets into motion an interplay of concepts such as: Lugones's "world"-travelling, Braidotti's *nomadism*, Frye's *arrogant perception*, Kent's *legitimate universal* and Ellis's *cultural mulatto-ism*. The purpose of this strategy is to demonstrate that Dove's poetry permanently operates between the poles of nomadism and homecoming(s), where the two terms are not perceived as antinomial and mutually exclusive but as dialectical, mutually complementary. As a result, Dove avoids being pigeonholed as either an integrationist or separatist poet, transcending the traditional binary critical categories of classifying American black poets.

Key words: black(ness), Black Arts Movement, cosmopolitanism, cultural mulatto, homecoming(s), nomadism, universalism, "world"-travelling

Moving through changing sceneries – in geographical/spatial, cultural and intellectual terms – is a constant strategy in Rita Dove's exploration of various 'worlds' and her own identity as a poet of the post-Black Aesthetic generation. Her poetic journeys have always been simultaneously outward- and inward-oriented: the movement in space has been accompanied and complemented by the movement of thought, and by acute awareness of her position as a subject moulded by such categories as gender, race, class, education and age. Dove's literal and metaphorical *nomadism* allows her to borrow and assemble her poetic material across seemingly rigid categories, and work towards the "legitimate universal" which, in George Kent's (1972: 112) formulation, is a function of one's experience. Thus, Dove can be perceived as Trey Ellis's "cultural mulatto" – a black artist "educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures" who can "navigate easily in the white world" (Ellis: 235) represented in her poems by Europe with its history, culture and art. Even though Malin Pereira (2003: 94) suggests that in Dove's poetry "[u]ndergirding all is cosmopolitanism," which frees the black poet from entrapment in a narrowly defined black landscape (e.g. the ghetto), it would be interesting to complement this observation with Maria Lugones's concept of "world"-travelling which refers to friendly visiting of the experiential space(s) of the Other(s). Interestingly, among the "worlds" that Dove "travel[s] to lovingly" (Lugones 1987: 17) are the old black "*unfamiliar neighborhoods*" (Dove 1999: 88; italics mine), a phrase that points out that her *homecoming(s)* are essentially different from those demanded by black revolutionary poets of the 1960s/70s such as Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez. As she states directly in "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day," a poem which skillfully uses the trope of the Middle Passage, "I'd go home if I knew where to get off" (Dove 1999: 85).

This article locates Dove's poetry at the nexus of the above-mentioned categories. It focuses on the question of changing landscapes in her poetry, and its functional connection with her redefinition of the identity and role of a black poet of the post-Black Arts Movement generation.

In the brief poem "Wake," which is part of a sequence forming "A Suite for Augustus," a personal section in Dove's debut collection *The Yellow House on the Corner*, the female

persona states: "My heart, shy mulatto, wanders toward / The salt-edged contours of rock and sand / That stretch ahead into darkness" (Dove 1993: 25). Taken as a confession, these words express Dove's longing to venture into new territories, confronting unfamiliar landscapes, being lured by the endlessness of experiences promised by new vistas waiting in the fascinating darkness on the horizon. In the context of a clearly romantic relationship between the speaker and Augustus, the next line: "But you stand in the way," can be understood as a realisation of the limitations represented by a permanent relationship that the young female subject is not yet ready for. Instead of settling down, she chooses to follow her desire to wander. However, this statement should not be read merely in a narrowly personal manner since Augustus is not only the persona's lover but also a US soldier stationed in the Middle East and happy to move up in military ranks, as clarified by "*Back*," a poem which comes immediately after "*Wake*". The solidity of this figure represents an obstacle on the way to poetic-cum-personal development; walking past him becomes a necessary step towards self-definition.

In this way Dove problematizes her human-and-poetic position, emphasizing both self-awareness as a black woman who just in time' saves herself from being trapped in a love plot and Americanness (symbolized by Augustus), associated with colonizing the world by military control and economic exploitation of its natural resources. For him Kuwait equals career: "Down / through columns of khaki and ribbons, / escorted at night.../ You think: how far I've come," whereas she – as we remember – remains mesmerized by "[t]he salt-edged contours of rock and sand" (Dove 1993: 26), completely useless from a pragmatic point of view, and longs for "darkness" which gains an additional *racial* meaning as it is wandered toward by the poet's "heart" referred to as a "shy mulatto." In contrast with Augustus's certainty and, to use Marilyn Frye's (1983) term, his masculinist/capitalist-cum-military "arrogant perception" of the world, the result of which is reduction of the metaphysical desert landscape into merely "the radiance / of oil fields" (Dove 1993: 26), the female persona prefers a non-intrusive exploration of the world, whose pre-condition is 'shyness' and emotional involvement.

It must also be noticed that the speaker refers to her heart not only as "shy" (which excludes any possibility of conquering and exploiting other lands or lands of Other(s), suggesting gentleness, sensitivity, and respect for the object of perception although not timidity, let alone fear), but also as "mulatto," which brings to mind the concept of "cultural mulatto" launched by Trey Ellis in his *New Black Aesthetic* manifesto. As Ellis (1989: 235), who classifies himself in this category, puts it:

a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world... We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white or black people...Today's cultural mulattoes echo those 'tragic mulattoes' critic Sterling Brown wrote about in the Thirties only when they too forget they are wholly black.

Even though Ellis's proud announcement of the rich complexity of his cultural mulatto experience and enthusiastic expansionism is checked by Dove's strategy of 'shyness', she, too, combines an exploration of the "multi-racial mix of cultures" with a constant awareness that as a person and poet she is "wholly black". It seems that for Dove-the-cultural-mulatto her natural habitat is a constantly changing landscape, the moving through of which allows her not only to discover the world, but also comprehend and actively reshape her identity, so as to avoid entrapment in the cage of the narrowly defined category of blackness forged by luminaries of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. Her personal and artistic freedom is achieved through intellectual confrontation with the experiences of other people – experiences which occurred at different times in history in various, frequently distant, places

in Europe, Asia, North Africa and North America. This strategy protects her from the black solipsism of the earlier generation, and simultaneously makes her acutely aware of subtle aspects of her own personal/poetic identity resulting from an interaction between specific categories such as gender, race, class, education and age. It is difficult to resist the impression that her movement in space, and the fluidity of experience that it generates, allows Dove to rebel against the concept of blackness as a strict, predominant and self-explanatory category defining African American identity, and anchoring it within the limits of what Baraka calls *home*: the *black* ghetto, *black* history, *black* culture, *black* ideology and *black* (self)awareness. Simultaneously, her blackness becomes liberated as a result of this constant confrontation with other experiences and, in consequence, gives her freedom enough to revisit the old black neighborhoods.

Dove's collections of poetry abound with references to various geographical sites and places – almost without exception mentioned by name – all over the globe: Paris, Versailles, Florence, Siena, Rome, Munich, Willendorf, Delft, Tunisia, China, Alexandria, Argos, Corinth, Damascus, Jerusalem, Eastern Europe, Dominican Republic, Washington D.C., New England, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana to mention just a few locations actually visited by the poet or travelled to in imagination. Also sometimes the very titles of her individual poems emphasize movement, changing places, being in a state of transition and impermanence: "The Transport of Slaves From Maryland to Mississippi," "Early Morning on the Tel Aviv-Haifa Freeway," "The Sahara Bus Trip," "Corduroy Road," "On the Road to Damascus," "On the Bus with Rosa Parks," "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day." Thus, Dove creates a poetic unquiet-spirit persona who does not wish to take root and remain situated or fixed in one place, and who simultaneously chooses strongly culturally-coded locations for her poetic peregrinations. In this sense she chooses to function as, to use Ross Posnock's (1998: 12) term, a black "world citizen," and also – by erudite implementation in her references to, and materials borrowed from, a range of cultures – follow the "cosmopolitan" (Posnock 1998) path within the African American literary and intellectual tradition (e.g., DuBois, Locke, Hurston, Ellison, Baldwin, Hayden).

Dove's critics and commentators have noticed the poet's almost compulsive strategy of perpetual travel through physical-cum-cultural landscape. And as she herself says in a poem "Early Morning on the Tel Aviv-Haifa Freeway," noticing discreet manifestations of intense horror and beauty of the world around her, "We should stop / but drive on" (Dove 1993: 124), the critics often speak about *nomadism* as an essential quality in her works. Nonetheless, they ascribe different meanings to this term: Ekaterini Georgoudaki (1991) and Therese Steffen (1997) talk about *displacement*, *exile*, and *migrating* in their respective discussions of Dove's *oeuvre*, whereas Malin Pereira takes a somewhat separate and more precise view, emphasizing the fact that these are not categories resulting from one's free choice, but are determined by the external circumstances. The latter critic acutely points out that the exile is not only "forever displaced" but also "in a sense 'countryless'," while the migrant changes one location for another and is "often fixed in a lower class" (Dove 2003: 95) – surely not categories that apply to Dove. Pereira chooses to use Rosi Braidotti's conceptualization of the term *nomad* which "does not stand for homelessness or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity" (Braidotti 1994: 22). For Braidotti, *nomadism* is not merely the practice of moving from place to place, but rather a

theoretical figuration for contemporary subjectivity – out of the phallogocentric vision of the subject [that represents a] situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject... This subject can also be described as postmodern/industrial/colonial, depending on one's locations. In so far as axes of differentiation such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and

others intersect and interact with each other in the constitution of subjectivity, the notion of the nomad refers to the simultaneous occurrence of many of these at once. (Braidotti 1994: 1,4)

Such an understanding of *nomadism* applies perfectly to Dove's way of speaking and probing the world in her poetry – and not only in the case of her mature poetry as claimed by Pereira, since Dove from the very first volume has spoken 'in tongues' as a black, American, mother, lover, daughter and granddaughter, erudite writer, artist, traveller, conference participant, etc., always negotiating with herself and the world the position from which she speaks. Statistically, she is most frequently concerned with various aspects of female experience that become available to her not only from everyday personal and professional occurrences, but also through confrontation with the fates of individual women ranging from historical figures like Fiametta, Boccaccio's beloved muse, speaking in despair about the plague; Catherine of Alexandria, who rebuked the emperor Galerius Valerius Maximinus and was condemned to be broken on the wheel; Catherine of Siena, who received stigmata and became politically and socially active; Tou Wan from ancient China, who without open complaint accepts her inferior position as a woman and wife; Nestor's wife talking about her loneliness; Claudette Colvin, who was the first person to resist segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama; and Rasha the black Dove – a circus artist painted by Christian Shad; to Dove's grandmother, whose life story is presented in the "Canary in Bloom" section of *Thomas and Beulah*; a slave woman Pamela and her unsuccessful attempt to run away from a plantation; a house slave hearing her sister being raped; a slave Belinda, petitioning the "honorable Senat and House / of Representatives of this Country" to sever the "Binds of Tyranny" for blacks (Dove 1993: 28); to the mythological Demeter and Persephone whose story is retold in the reality of contemporary Paris. Thus, it seems to be only partially true that – as Georgoudaki (1991b: 430) says – Dove "speaks with the authority of an artist who claims the world's civilizations as her rightful heritage." The poet herself goes further than that by giving voice to women so different from herself: by relating their fates without idealizing them, she deliberately and consistently alters the cultural landscape she travels through while simultaneously and continuously redefining her own identity in the process.

Confrontation with 'otherness' without being morally judgmental does not only concern Dove's poems about women. An identical approach can be seen in the case of the male characters she confronts in her works – including the dictator of the Dominican Republic Rafael Trujillo, who in 1937 "ordered 20,000 blacks killed because they could not pronounce the letter 'r' in *perejil*, the Spanish word for parsley" (Dove 1993: 136). In "Parsley" Dove attempts to reconstruct his thought processes along with his covert motivation for ordering the slaughter, yet she does so not in order to explain, let alone excuse the murderer, but in order to try to understand.

Thus, Dove's nomadism and movement through changing cultural landscapes turns out to be less an attempt to keep a poetic travelogue and more an epistemological strategy. Without it, no serious – or even real – understanding can take place, a decided contrast to the attitudes advocated by her immediate poetic predecessors, the Black Arts Movement activists such as Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti, who demanded from African American poets that they, to use Robert Stepto's (1979: 167) terms, 'immerse' in black culture rather than 'ascend' toward white artistic standards and norms like the 'integrationists' Robert Hayden or Melvin Tolson, choosing black particularity and cultural separatism over the so-called 'universality' of human experience. Nomadism allows Dove not only to avoid black parochialism, but also to discover and represent the relational character of human experience, working towards what George Kent calls the "legitimate universalism" which, as has been already said, is a function of one's experience rather than internalised intellectual constructs and assumptions. In this

aspect it can be interpreted as a version of Maria Lugones's "world'-travelling," presented by her as an efficient way of knowing oneself and knowing others.

The feminist philosopher Lugones distinguishes two types of "worlds" and the two types of travel they determine: "[t]here are 'worlds' we enter at our own risk, 'worlds' that have agon [in Roger Caillois' sense of the term], conquest, and arrogance as the main ingredients in their ethos...But there are 'worlds' that we can travel to lovingly and travelling to them is part of loving at least some of their inhabitants" (Lugones 1987: 17). Lugones extends Hegel's concept that "self-recognition requires other subjects" by disagreeing with him that "it requires tension or hostility" (Lugones 1987: 17). She maintains that "travelling to someone's 'world' is a way of identifying with them...because by travelling to their 'world' we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*. Only when we have travelled to each others' 'worlds' we are fully subjects to each other" (Lugones 1987: 17).

Among the worlds that Dove "travel[s] to lovingly" are the old black "unfamiliar neighborhoods," a phrase that points out that her *homecoming(s)* are markedly and intentionally different from those of Black Arts Movement poets of the 1960s/70s such as Sonia Sanchez for example. The latter poet in her manifesto-poem "Homecoming" (Sanchez 1969: 9) talks about two chronologically separate kinds of homecoming. The first one was visiting home after being away for a longer period of time during her studies in college, when she discovers her own estrangement from the place – she perceives her return as done "tourist style". The second return that the poem talks about is the result of a mature decision ("now woman"). It also requires leaving behind the white intellectual world represented here by "freudian dreams" and "the newspapers." The persona rejects this world as generating a false picture of black reality: "i have learned it / ain't like they say / in the newspapers." Thus, for Sanchez there existed only an either-or choice, an attitude characteristic of the Black Aesthetic period: the truly black artist rejects white discourse, merges with the black community and serves its spiritual and ideological needs. In Dove's poems, however, such regular returns are always treated with ambiguity and sometimes even with self-distancing (often ironic), which nonetheless does not erase love or any sense of belonging to the place. The most striking examples are provided by poems such as "Teach Us to Number Our Days," "Nigger Song: An Odyssey," "Shakespeare Say," "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day" and "The Pond, Porch-View: Six P.M., Early Spring."

"Teach Us to Number Our Days" sketches a depressing picture of the ghetto landscape:

In the old neighborhood, each funeral parlor
is more elaborate than the last.
The alleys smell of cops, pistols bumping their thighs,
each chamber steeled with a slim blue bullet.

Low-rent balconies stacked to the sky.
A boy plays tic-tac-to on a moon
crossed by TV antennae... (Dove 1993: 13)

This is a dreary landscape of hopelessness, with everpresent violence and death, permeated by a claustrophobic atmosphere ("Low-rent balconies stacked to the sky") enhanced by the motif of imprisonment ("a moon/crossed by TV antennae"). Dove's poem evokes the subject matter and atmosphere of Sonia Sanchez's "Bubba" (1984: 55-58) which relates the story of the poet's sensitive young schoolfriend, an artistic soul Bubba who,

trapped in ghetto life with its lack of any prospects, becomes a drug addict who finally ends his life by jumping off a roof. Nevertheless, unlike Sanchez's short story-poem, Dove's is no didactic 'consciousness raising' text, but a disinterested statement of hard facts. In consequence, it should come as no surprise that "Teach Us to Number Our Days" is followed by "Nigger Song: An Odyssey" whose theme is escape out of this place:

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 grey-green nigger night.

...
Weeds clutch at the wheels;
We laugh and swerve away, veering
...
The green smoke sizzling on our tongues...

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." (Dove 1993: 14)

As Pereira (2003: 59-60) claims, this poem "seems a next-generation response to being set free from the black arts movement...This generation is free... to 'swerve away' from the restrictions of the past, although the weeds 'clutch at the wheels,' free to go straight into the heart of blackness, the green again connoting the potential for growth." It must be pointed out that such an interpretation results from the critic's somewhat arbitrary decision to pair the poem with "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In a Dream" (Dove 1993: 12). However, placed after "Teach Us to Number Our Days" with its bleak ghettoscape, it appears to treat more with the impossibility of leaving home even in a situation when black youth are free from the necessity to obey the artistic and ideological proscriptions of their elder brothers and sisters. The poem is replete with references to intoxication and altered states of consciousness: "the grey-green...night," "weeds", "the green smoke sizzling on our tongues", "[l]aughter spilling like gin from glasses," suggesting that Dove may here be confronting her own suspicion or even anxiety that, in spite of her generation's freedom from ideological obligations, escaping the ghetto is still only an illusion since the joyride ends at the point of departure: "we ride / Into the gray-green nigger night. / ... / thick with the smell of cabbages," in whose context the proud and arrogant statement "[n]othing can catch us" sounds tainted with irony and ignorance. The poem seems to say that there is no escape but navigating a long way back home – hence the subtitle: "An Odyssey."

The theme of homecoming has appeared regularly in Dove's subsequent collections of poetry. Its importance and discreet centrality in the output of the author of *Thomas and Beulah* becomes evident when Dove opens her 1993 *Selected Poems* with an "Introduction" that contains a long poem "In the Old Neighborhood" (Dove 1993: xxii-xxvi) which describes her visit home for her sister's wedding after a longer absence. The poem's mood is far from joyful and affirmative (unlike that of Nikki Giovanni's childhood and home poems, her signature-poem "Nikki-Rosa" for instance): the central image being a recollection of a starling "caught in the blades" (Dove 1993: xxv) of an attic fan. Here Dove clearly makes an allusion to her bird-surname, choosing for herself as a poet and person the role of a homing

pigeon – a bird that regularly flies long distances away from home but always returns to the nest.

Nonetheless, this homewardness of Dove's poetic "world"-travelling has its price in anxiety and uncertainty, which seem to serve as a pre-condition for a sense of belonging to a particular black location. Characteristically, the poet deals with them either by adopting someone else's voice or by assuming an ironic tone when speaking in the first person singular. They come forward most conspicuously in "Shakespeare Say," "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day" and "The Pond, Porch-View: Six P.M., Early Spring."

The first poem, which maintains a subtle dialogue with Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues," concentrates on the experience of Champion Jack Dupree, a black blues singer who extensively toured Europe, staying away from home for extended periods of time. When caught in winter in Munich (Rita Dove also lived in Germany for a few years) he moans to himself:

*my home's in Louisiana,
my voice is wrong,
I'm broke and can't hold
my piss;
my mother told me
there'd be days like this.* (Dove 1993: 91)

It must be emphasized, however, that the musician's complaints are made with full awareness that "even the mistakes/sound like jazz" (90), which means that they are necessary part of his blues identity, essential for his artistic creativity. Being broke, ill, in bad singing form, and far away from a home talked about with ironic distance, all allow Dupree to maintain authenticity on stage. In "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day" Dove herself reveals a similar paradox connected with *travelling in the "world"* of blackness rather than living in it:

Here I float on the lap of existence. Each night
I put this body into its sleeve of dark water with no more

than a teardrop of ecstasy, a thimbleful of ache.
And that, friends, is the difference—
I can't erase an ache I never had.
Not even my own grandmother would pity me;
instead she'd suck her teeth at the sorry sight
of some Negro actually looking for misery.

well, I'd go home if I knew where to get off. (Dove 1999: 84-5)

Significantly, the Middle Passage cannot be experienced second-hand or as a simulation of historical experience of transported slaves in the act of creative imagination, and when an attempt is made to pretend it can, it results in nothing more than mediocre, pathetic emotions: "a teardrop of ecstasy, a thimbleful of ache." "World"-travelling, which becomes nothing more than "float[ing] on the lap of existence" and turns into "actually *looking for* misery," ends in the speaker's disorientation and confusion concerning the question of where home is and where her journey ends.

As a result, Dove's subject is caught in a permanent movement whose result is, on one hand, the defamiliarization of black "neighborhoods" and on the other, disappointment mixed with resignation to the possibility that the journey has come to its end 'right here, right now.' This point is made perfectly clear, even though characteristically to Dove slightly ironically, in "The Pond, Porch-View: Six P.M., Early Spring," a poem closing her 1999 collection titled *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*:

Where I'm now
is more like riding on a bus
through unfamiliar neighborhoods—
chair in recline, the view chopped square
and dimming quick. I know
I vowed I'd get off
somewhere grand; like that dear goose
come honking down
from Canada, I tried to end up anyplace but here.
who am I kidding? Here I am.

Nevertheless, if the irony of this excerpt is interpreted as a device screening the speaker's relief which is revealed in the final short statement "Here I am," we can conclude that Dove perceives her poetic nomadism and her homecoming(s) not in terms of antinomy but dialectic (in Hegelian sense of the term). Contrary to being mutually exclusive, the two terms, which organise Dove's understanding of role of an African American poet of the post-Black Arts Movement generation, function as mutually complementary opposites necessary for successful "world"-travelling based on constant departures from and returns back to the old black – forever unfamiliar – neighborhoods.

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