

A Postethnic Revisiting of History in Rita Dove's *The Yellow House on the Corner* and *Thomas and Beulah*

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Abstract: This paper analyses Hollinger's theory of postethnicity as an attempt to formulate a new "collective memory" by challenging the metanarrative of history as a racialized domain with parallel frames of memory for blacks and whites in America. It will trace two of Rita Dove's collections of poems, *The Yellow House on the Corner* and *Thomas and Beulah*, as foreshadowing a trend in African-American writing whose specifics Hollinger would define in the nineties by the term "postethnic." Building on the precept that race is an "anachronistic term" that nevertheless gained the force of reality through segregation of domains in the psyche reinforced through racial memory, Dove seeks to counter historical myths through metaphor and imagery. Thus, while *Thomas and Beulah* foregrounds individual lives against the backdrop of slavery, it eschews the celebration of Blackness as a counter to the ethnocentric, essentialist norms of identity construction for African-Americans. *The Yellow House on the Corner* builds on Dove's travels to Europe to effect a transatlantic crossing over in the psyche that corroborates Hollinger's view of the postethnic countering of race through "voluntary affiliations." Through her revisiting of the spatio-psychological domain of the memory, Dove's poems reformulate the framework which defines historicity and the epistemology of race. In this epistemic formulation of history, Dove emphasises how cultures carry their antecedents and memory perpetrates itself through signification. Even as the language of the poems retreats into the symbolic, it emphasises the role of perspective in framing ideologies which then become learned truth.

Keywords: America, postethnicity, history, metanarrative, memory, trauma.

Historical narratives in America have traditionally conformed to racial domains, and parallel frames of memory exist for the races. The prevalence of prescriptive identities conforming to specific ethno-racial blocks has contributed further to polarisation, and the present and the past are conjoined in a dichotomous framing of events that depends on racial affiliations. Although it has long been accepted as "artificial, constructed, and without inherent meaning"

(Kolchin 157), and “an ideological, political deployment rather than a neutral, biologically determined element of nature” (Jacobson 14), the role of race in the construction of identities in the United States has been very real. Even as it results in contradictory socio-political and cultural notions of what comprises “national identity” in the United States, it nevertheless plays an undeniable part in constructing the framework that supports notions of history as a twin legacy. In the 1990s, David Hollinger realized that this dichotomous framing of the past prevented interracial connections being formed, with identities having to adhere to prescriptive ethno-racial labels. He posited the theory of postethnicity as a way to accept the realities of a multicultural society made more complex by the legacy of slavery and miscegenation, and stated that “identity,” which was static, needed to be replaced by voluntary “affiliations” (7), which would take into account both the legacy of the past as well as the postmodern fluidity of existence. This paper will analyze Rita Dove’s foreshadowing of Hollinger’s theory of postethnicity in her poetry in an attempt to formulate a new “collective memory” by challenging the metanarrative of history as a racialized domain. It will trace two of Dove’s collections of poems, *The Yellow House on the Corner* and *Thomas and Beulah*, as initiating a trend in African-American writing whose specifics Hollinger would later define as “postethnic.”

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 colour line” (xi). African-American writing has traditionally exhibited traits of Du Boisian “double consciousness”... “two warring souls in one dark body” (194), 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. This consciousness of the racialized self at the fringes builds itself through imagery. In a study that focuses on racialized imagery as constructing reality, Richard Dyer observes that images organise the modern world, observing that “...since race in itself—insofar as it is anything in itself—refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical / physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play” (1). Dove’s poetry inverts this imagery to deliberate on how history is constructed through images that are dominated by colour. Historically, the colour of the skin became the sole identifier of identity for African-Americans, and the term “black” a pejorative signifier that carried undeniable associations with slavery. The links between the present and the past were forged through the colour of the skin.

In a marked departure from this trend, Dove's poems eschew both ethnocentric singularity and an assimilationist outlook, exploring the possibilities of a postmodern blurring of frames of existence to revisit historical narratives. Building on the precept that race is an "anachronistic term" (Hollinger 9) that nevertheless gained the force of reality through segregation of domains in the psyche reinforced through racial memory, Dove seeks to reveal the politics of this dichotomous framing of the past. Her poetry seeks to counter the linearity of historical frames through metaphor and imagery, making the black and the white collaborators in an attempt to juxtapose parallel frames of memory. Thus, while *Thomas and Beulah* foregrounds individual lives against the backdrop of slavery, it eschews the celebration of Blackness as a counter to the ethnocentric, essentialist norms of identity construction for African-Americans. *The Yellow House on the Corner* builds on Dove's travels to Europe to effect a transatlantic crossing over in the psyche that corroborates Hollinger's view of the postethnic countering of race through voluntary affiliations. Through her revisiting of the psycho-spatial domain of the memory, the poems in both these collections reformulate the framework which defines historicity and the epistemology of race. In this epistemic reformulation of history, Dove emphasises how cultures carry their antecedents and memory perpetrates itself through signification. Even as the language of the poems retreats into the symbolic, it emphasises the role of perspective in framing ideologies which then become learned truth.

The Yellow House on the Corner, published in 1980, was Dove's first collection of poems. The work juxtaposes frames of memory from the past with her travels in Europe. Dove traces the experience of being an African-American, both as a slave in antebellum America and as a traveller in contemporary Europe. Building on her own experiences, she traces the cultural effects of travelling, both figuratively as one who attempts to go back in memory to the site where slavery becomes the present, and literally in her transatlantic travels in the 1970s. Her poems, thus, transcend space and time in attempting to explore what it means to be African-American. In her writing, slavery is a recurring motif, and colour remains a potent symbol of identification.

The first section of *The Yellow House on the Corner* initiates the transatlantic crossing over as Dove borrows from Japanese and European myths. In this section, titled "The Life," she portrays an awareness of objectification and of being "black," the colour of her skin making her the representative of the suffering of slaves. As she travels through Germany, Dove

becomes aware of her own alienation—“the object of cultural stereotyping” (Righaletto 7). 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). This awareness of racialized embodiment makes her aware of the signifiers that confer labels that then translate into identities. Her writing reflects the need to transcend these prescriptive ethno-racial identifiers to reach back to the white roots of the black man in America. Believing that Europe is an inescapable part of African presence in America, she posits a postethnic crossing across boundaries of colour. Righaletto says of Dove: “As a writer she turns her own estrangement to account” (8). 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 poems trace the complex nature of the transatlantic crossing that defies labelling.

History plays an important role in the construction of images that then live on as truth. The construction of dichotomous identities on either side of the colour line excludes the important role played by the Other in history. Dove feels the need to revisit history for a reconstitution of images that construct memories of slavery. Her poems strive to transcend the DuBoisian “double consciousness” (194) that results from parallel frames of memory for the centre and the margins by juxtaposing both the frames in a symbolic exposition of colours. Her awareness of the constructed nature of double consciousness leads her to explore difference as a myth. The other poems in the collection 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, and its myths are exposed as constructed. In these poems, Dove undertakes a transatlantic crossing over to create a parallel frame wherein both black and white become symbols of a traumatic past. In a poem titled “the Snow King,” she talks of “a far far land” (1) where lime filled spaces symbolize the not too distant holocaust, and the snow king cries for “the night as soft as antelope’s eyes” (7). It is a world of destruction, where diversity is dead, and the heart of the perpetrator “cracked...a slow fire, a garnet” (10). In the next poem, titled “Sightseeing,” Dove explores the meaning of symbols of history as we view it. While visiting a church destroyed after the Allies bombed it, she talks about the impossibility of viewing history devoid of symbols. The temporal distancing of the present from the past lends the past symbolic meaning. Dove 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)

In her poems, Dove juxtaposes American and European myths to create a frame wherein she explores these as strategies for survival in an adverse world. Inferring that history itself is a symbolic reconstruction that provides an escape from “the vulgarity of life in exemplary size” (28-29), she then attempts to deconstruct the myths that prevent an objective view of the past. The next poem in the collection, titled “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee in a Dream,” 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)

The three poems that follow this poem visit contemporary black neighbourhoods. The satirical reference in these poems to Biblical wisdom brings to the fore the distorting nature of both religious and cultural beliefs aimed at imprisoning the black man in the past. The first poem in the next section, titled “Five Elephants” also talks of memory and of how the past limits the present. Emphasising that memory has been constructed through imagery, Dove uses the same technique to deconstruct their power across spatio-temporal erasures:

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)

Dove's assertion that memory limits experiential transcending of barriers, visible in the image of the metaphorical trunks of elephants "hooking the sky" (9), permeates her sense of African-American identity being limited by cultural and social norms structuring identity construction. In the process, Gilroy's assertion that cultures cannot be "sealed off hermetically" (2) is reflected in the contentious role of race in constructing identities structured by memory. It is a conscious understanding of how the mechanics of memory are constructed to restrict the individual that permits him to transcend these barriers. The poem "Geometry" sets the writer free of such restrictions. Dove contends that the mere realization 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)

The need for a space where frames of memory juxtapose is defined by the concluding lines of the poem "Geometry." It is only after the ceiling floats away that perspectives, symbolised by "windows" can 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 deconstruction of memory as a frame built through (racialized) imagery lends credence to the concept of contingent historicity. 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" (60). Dove's poems examine closely the myths and beliefs that live on as larger-than-life truths in the memory, preventing emotional distancing. In her first collection of poems, she posits travelling as a way towards this distancing. As "the ceiling

floats away” in the memory, the poet revisits slavery and the sites of historical trauma. Each poem in this section deals with individual lives affected by slavery. The use of colloquialism in “Belinda’s Petition” combined with an emphasis on historical authenticity in “The Transport of Slaves From Maryland to Mississippi” brings to the fore individual consciousnesses buried in the metanarrative of disjunctive frames of memory. Vendler talks of Dove’s “willingness to make her readers uneasy,” yet ascribes to her poetry a “wish to achieve historical linguistic probability” (66). In terming her poetry “relatively unsuccessful historical excursions in a lyric time-machine” (66), however, she misses the pattern that does not aim for historical authenticity or lyrical perfection, but uses both to light up memory built through images that are perspectival.

Having achieved this, Dove then presents history as individual, rather than part of a collective memory. This is an attempt to reconstitute the entire framework that constitutes memory. Her third collection of poems, titled *Thomas and Beulah*, written in 1986, revisits slavery as a “lived experience.” The poems foreground the lives of Thomas, a male slave, and Beulah, a female slave, against the backdrop of historical events that mark the twentieth century. This collection builds on the deconstruction of the real and the mythical in her first collection, as well as the objectivity that permits an acceptance of the Other as part of individual history. For Dove, history is lived apart from official records; it is in the everyday lived experience of common men and women that history is to be found. Here, the personal is the political. It marks the struggle of its protagonists as each aspires to the American Dream, and the poems examine closely what it means to be black in postbellum America. Gender lines are drawn as the lives of both Thomas and Beulah play themselves out against the backdrop of historical events.

Thomas and Beulah is divided into two sections, the first tracing the life of Thomas, and the second of Beulah. The first poem, titled “The Event,” marks the beginning of Thomas’ journey from Tennessee in 1919 as part of the Great Migration. The mandolin, central to Thomas’ life, marks the first poem that records both hope and sadness. Music, for Dove, was the black man’s language, drawing him into its stoic folds in a racialized world. The poem also presents the wheel, a powerful trope in the life of Thomas, and a symbol of the black man’s powerlessness:

They spat where the wheel
churned mud and moonlight,

they called to the tarantulas
down among the bananas
to come out and dance. (9-13)

However, Thomas' companion drowns, and Thomas is left to reach Aakron, Ohio, in 1921, alone. The second poem, titled "Variation on Pain" marks grief as the mandolin lives the gasps of Lym as he struggled for air. The third poem, titled "Jiving" sees Thomas arrive in Aakron, alone and full of dreams. As the poems trace Thomas' life in Ohio, personal history dominates the frame. They follow Thomas' courtship of Beulah, and await with him the birth of his first child. "The Charm" talks of memory, as the days in the South flash into the reality of a life spent pursuing the American Dream:

The canary sang more furious
than ever, but he heard
the whisper: *I ain't dead.*
I just gave you my life. (18-21)

The memory of Lem's death never leaves Thomas as he lives out his life in the North. The poems follow him as he lives through the war, and the weariness of spirit is reflected in "the negativizing of the imagery of light in the poems" (Righelato 84). The title of the last poem in Thomas' section, "Thomas at the Wheel," indicates that life has come full circle for him. Ironically, although he is at the wheel, Thomas has never been in complete control of his life. He has lived through two world wars and has spent his life trying to assert his identity in a world marked by economic hardship and racial inequality, and his journey is marked by the image of water wherein it began:

This, then, the river he had to swim.
Through the wipers the drugstore
shouted, lit up like a casino,
neon script leering from the shuddering asphalt. (1-4)

Beulah's life is marked by colour. Her section of the collection is titled "Canary in Bloom," the image of the encaged canary in direct contradiction to Thomas' freedom symbolised by water. The first poem of the section, titled "Taking in Wash," shows her awareness of her blackness: "She was Papa's girl, / black though she was" (11-12). The poem emphasises the mother as the strong moral centre of the family, protective of her daughter and firm in the face of her husband's vagaries: "*Touch that child / and I'll cut you down / just like the cedar of Lebanon*" (24-26). Dove portrays the female spirit encaged as it seeks solace in "wavery memory" ("Dusting", 21). Memory for Beulah acts as a protector who helps her weather

hardships during the war. For Beulah, reality is much like a dream, and memory takes on the shape of reality. In a poem titled “Weathering Out,” she describes herself as “large and placid, a lake” (13) even as “outside / everything shivered in tinfoil” (23). Beulah becomes a calm refuge in a disturbed world, helping both herself and her family to weather the storm. Colour reiterates its presence in the poem titled “The Great Palaces of Versailles” as Beulah contemplates on the difference between myth and reality: “*Nothing nastier than a white person!*” (1). This decentering of European greatness dismantles the projection of greatness vested on the white man in history, making his palaces but symbols of the evils which fostered them.

The section on Beulah acknowledges the past and changes in the present in a more direct manner than the one on Thomas. Even as Beulah reiterates the importance of history, saying, “Where she came from / was the past” (“Wingfoot Lake,” 32-33), she expresses no understanding of the yearning back to roots in Africa, saying, “What did she know about Africa?” (26). History for Beulah is personal, and the past is “12 miles into town / where nobody had locked their back door” (33-34). The past for her transcends events as they live on in public memory to result in a weaving together of bits of personal memory. This new fabric woven out of bits of individual lives forms the new “collective memory” that Dove believes is necessary for a postethnic transcending of ethno-racial borders. The lives of both Thomas and Beulah counter history as a metanarrative, emphasising instead the smaller events that become linked in memory. In this collection, as in *The Yellow House on the Corner*, Dove emphasizes personal memory over the official narrative.

Thus, both *The Yellow House on the Corner* and *Thomas and Beulah* emphasise history as personal. Race remains a recurrent trope in both the collections, but Dove eschews a celebration of blackness and black history, choosing instead a wide canvas that exemplifies Hollinger’s precepts on the need to replace identity with voluntary affiliations across colour lines. This marks a new trend in contemporary African-American writing, moving away from an ethnocentric approach to race and history to a juxtaposition of collective frames in the memory to form a new collective memory. Arguing that double consciousness occurs when the white origins of African-American identity are repressed to stress ethnocentrism, Dove’s poetry repudiates black cultural nationalism in favour of the individual perspective. Positing that an emphasis on black identity only emphasises the white normative, Dove seeks to counter the racialization of memory in her poetry.

Foregrounding history as a personal, transcultural space where frames of memory are juxtaposed to reveal the constructed nature of racially informed identities and affiliations, Dove's poems create what Steffens terms "artistic enspacement" (111), exhibiting a "post-black" sensibility that revisits race, memory and history as racialized psycho-spatial domains, 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. Using history, myth and language in her poems to effect this transatlantic crossing, Dove attempts a new mode of identity construction that foregrounds the individual over officially recorded public memory.

Post-blackness stresses the liminal; Hollinger's theory of postethnicity presupposes an awareness of the structural networks that function to construct memory. In her attempt to create a textual domain that is at once liminal and heterotopic, Dove's poems initiate 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. In doing so, her work portrays an attempt to reframe not just the protocols of Black writing, but the entire discourse on race, memory and historical narratives in contemporary America.

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