

## The Black Aesthetic in Rita Dove's Playlist for the Apocalypse

By Sally Michael Hanna\*

*To Rita Dove, a renowned poet of great transformations and eclectic artistry, blackness is an aesthetic that must be embraced and celebrated. It is the project of this paper to reflect on the black aesthetic depicted in Rita Dove's Playlist for the Apocalypse (2021); a breakthrough volume presenting blackness as an "Ars Poetica" an "X marks the spot" leading to Dove's signature crossing. In this volume, Dove presents a playlist of the everyday and of the nation's history over the past fifty years. The title of the volume, while acknowledging the sequential playfulness of a music playlist, it maintains a cadence of finality brought about by the word "apocalypse." Playlist for the Apocalypse presents "a lifetime of song" dramatizing Dove's view of the idea of the apocalypse as both end and resurrection recorded in personal triumphs and pains as her stories meet with the grand arc of history.*

**Keywords:** Black aesthetic, grand arc of history, music, vocalization, orchestration, memory, race, anger, resignation, disease, death, resurrection

To Rita Dove, a renowned poet of great transformations and eclectic artistry, blackness is an aesthetic that must be embraced and celebrated. It is the project of this paper to reflect on the black aesthetic depicted in Rita Dove's *Playlist for the Apocalypse* (2021); a breakthrough volume presenting blackness as an "Ars Poetica," an "X marks the spot"<sup>1</sup> leading to Dove's signature crossing. To morph a new black aesthetic, Dove, together with renowned African American thinkers, acknowledged the necessity of walking the tight line between the imperatives of political and cultural agency on the one hand, and the reconstitution of a novel sense of black subjectivity that taps into race pride. The result of such deliberations was the rise of a paradigm that bridged the chasm between an entrenched arsenal of racial authority and the hegemony of western tradition. Dove prides herself on producing a new African American literature that allows entrance into a language acknowledging race without the venom or haunting pathos. Dove has always known that to achieve such an end, she must delve deep into history as the shaping power of African American consciousness. Hers is a literary canon that influences

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\*Professor of American Literature, 6 October University, Egypt.

<sup>1</sup>In "Ars Poetica," a poem from her volume *Grace Notes*, Dove describes herself as a hawk swooping down a ghost town finding its vantage point which is both a point of intersection and a point of crossing.

What I want is this poem to be small,  
a ghost town  
on the larger map of wills.  
Then you can pencil me in as a hawk:  
a travelling x-marks- the-spot. (48)

black culture rather than being influenced by it. The importance of history as an entry into this new aesthetic of blackness could not have been better expressed than by Henry Louis Gates in *Loose Canons: Notes on Cultural Wars*:

In our attempt at canon formation, we are demanding a return to history in a manner scarcely conceived of by the new historicists. Nor can we opt of our own private histories, which Houston Baker calls the African American autobiographical moment, and which I call the autocritography (Gates 1992, p. 166).

The literature that Gates postulates formulates a vision of blackness capable of self-criticism rather than being helplessly proscribed by what blackness means from a sociopolitical perspective. In the wake of the Black Power Movement that presented blackness as an essence bracketing the African American literary product, Houston Baker celebrated “the emergent theoretical prospect” that attempts to discover how the qualities of a literary domain shape Afro- American life. Baker suggested the importance of “a move from the whole of culture to the part signaled by the most recent generational shift in Afro- American literary criticism” (Gates 2000, p. 198).

Moreover, Baker argued for an African American canon that is “an expressive embodiment of spirit work” (Baker 1992, p. 136). He believed that a black national script of empowerment can come about by investing in the power of “imagistic fields” (Baker 1992, p. 150) that is a poetics that accesses “the general, overarching, or framing images and values of a culture as well as foregrounding the quite specific values or instances that modify or expand a general field” (Baker 1992, p. 150). Baker’s poetics may be described as a “phenomenology of conjure” (Baker 1992, p. 154); constellations of images that reveal the workings of the spirit. The product of such reasoning is a literature that is authentic in terms of its representation of blackness; in that it acknowledges the spirit of blackness and celebrates its humanity rather than being sidelined in a psychopathology of racial pathos. The vision of this novel literature is not constricted by any paradigm but is enlarged in the sense of establishing and defining the contours of social edicts.

Versatile in exploring the reaches of her identity, Dove has sailed the turbulent waters of racial identification of self, but never at any point in time has she drawn on it as the sole definition of self. Arnold Rampersad reflected on the universality of Dove’s work that “instead of an obsession with the theme of race, one finds an eagerness, perhaps even an anxiety, to transcend- if not actually to repudiate- black cultural nationalism in the name of a more inclusive sensibility (Rampersad 1986, p. 53). He advances his argument when he refers to Dove’s literary product as one that maintains a “disciplined” distance that “prizes objectivity” (Rampersad 1986, p. 53). He adds that she writes of black experience “mainly in the course of ordinary things” (Rampersad 1986, p. 55).

Dove staged numerous attempts for an entry into blackness all through her literary career manipulating different registers to find the “best way in” (Vendler 1995a, p. 160). Helen Vendler argues that “Dove’s skin color gave her blackness” (Vendler 1995b, p. xii) “as a *donne*” (Vendler 1995b, p. 61) but has never prescribed a limit on what she could be. Vendler most succinctly sums up Dove’s virtuosity in terms of a discovery that “blackness need not be one’s central subject,

but equally need not be omitted” (Vendler 1995b, p. 82). Vendler elaborates on the “daunting task” that Dove has undertaken in being “faithful to, and yet unconstrained by, the presence- always already given in Black America- of Blackness” (Vendler 1995b, p. 87). Despite Dove’s loyalty to her racial orientation, she rises to the occasion of expanding beyond the threshold of her skin color and soar to the limitless expanse of humanity at large. Hers is a poetry that flows from a place of literary and spiritual abundance that eludes the grip of social or racial circumstance.

There are moments in her work in which she rightfully chooses to move out of the black predicament only to come back to it by creating associations with other universal groups of the disadvantaged worldwide. A perfect example of such instance can be found in ‘Parsley,’ a poem in her volume *Museum* in which she inhabited the mind of a Dominican dictator who ordered the massacre of a field full of Haitians for their failure to pronounce the letter “r” in parsley. Dove confesses to Therese Steffen that the notion of black art is not set in stone:

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 (169).

Knowledgeable of her role as a writer, Dove shares her gratitude to earlier generations who muddied their hands fighting for a definitive black aesthetic:

Sometimes I feel like getting down on my knees and saying thank you because these battles have been already fought. And these are not easy battles between confessionalism and beat poetry and formalism, or whether poetry adheres to gender or not, or whether it adheres to whatever black aesthetics. These discussions have been on the table. We haven’t had to clear the path first before writing (Kirkpatrick 1995, p. 37).

She insists in her interview with Johnson and Peabody (1985) that the ‘pendulum had to swing back’ (6) from the reference to only blackness to a wider range of consciousness. She later insists that a “black artist is defined by differences more than rules--- so we can move a bit more freely in the field. We have surmounted what Langston Hughes called the “Racial Mountain” (Steffen 2001, p. 170). Blackness figures in Dove’s work in the form of helpless poverty, social diminishment, and human trauma. Dove has always created a community of characters who through their plurality of vision have presented definition of what blackness is. Dove’s work shares with the world a revised universalism that makes her a citizen of the world.

In more than one context, blackness to Dove has always conditioned a return to history that grounds it in facticity as it journeys toward the reaches of the fictitious. In her seminal book *Understanding Rita Dove*, Pat Righelato notes that Dove “has negotiated her artistic space with grace and determination” (Righelato

2006, p. 1) that helped bring African American history into the mainstream of American poetry (Righelato 2006, p. 4). The allure of history also attests to giving Dove as Vendler suggests “a prefabricated plot, and the lyric that has to dance to its tune” (Vendler 1995b, p. 66). Her engagement with history has helped universalize her work through beautiful imagery that helps keep a distance from the limitations of racial representation. About her take on history, Dove shares her views with Hanna and Basosi:

As soon as I was old enough to be aware of the world, I understood the “official” story as well as the view from the sidelines. I always thought of this as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. The black historian W.E.B. Dubois writes about the kind of binocular vision one acquires when one is not a part of the mainstream – it’s the ability to see things three dimensionally because you can take in the prevailing point of view while maintaining the revisionist view from the margins. I have always been aware that for every story deemed important and true by historians, there were a thousand others that would never make it into the history books. Obviously, we can’t put every event in the textbooks, yet just as obvious is that realization that every minute we live matters to us. All which disappears – that’s what interests me as a poet. So please, (to historians) continue to take care of the big stuff in history, and I’ll take care of the little stuff (Hanna and Basosi 2014, p. 259).

What Dove presents in her literary oeuvre, is the minute detail that makes up a life that is often left out. In an interview with Charles Rowell, Dove proclaims that her literary product appears as a *mélange* of fact and fiction often imparted in starburst fashion:

We think of history as a narrative, but all we have are little flashes, like Morse code; we connect the dots into the narrative line we call History. So, there I was, trying to keep this whole book up in the air as I wrote it. I found it counterproductive to even think about it in the kind of terms one would use to answer the question: “What’s it about?” (Rowell 2008, p. 696).

Dove’s volumes attempt in their variant ways to answer the question “what’s it about?” Her journey started with *The Yellow House on the Corner*, her first poetry volume, which included stories from slavery representing the grand arc of history, while her personal history was faintly playing in the background. *Museum*, her second volume, represented history as an artifact on display in a museum with hardly any sense of personal narrative. The Pulitzer Prize winning *Thomas and Beulah* was Dove’s first volume discussing her grandparents’ biography as the grand arc of history meets with the smaller spectrum of their personal narrative. Dealing with the challenges that her grandparents encountered helped her connect her life as an African American professor and author to theirs and to the ordeals they faced. Volumes to follow focused intently on Dove’s experience in the world, a Black woman, talented and educated who is tasked with carrying the torch to her entire family as she identifies with her racial roots which she clearly expressed in *Mother Love* and *Grace Notes*. *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* reached the apex of her political representation of blackness as Dove reenacted the Civil Rights Movement and gave voice to the voiceless. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr.

were the makers of this miracle of justice and liberty. In this volume, Dove reclaimed her right as a black woman speaking for the rights of liberty and equality for the race. From then on, her volumes dealt with racial representation with elaborate tact and freedom. *Sonata Mulattica* is a magnanimous volume that managed to write into music history the story of George Polgreen Bridgetower, a mulatto violinist and a composer, who lived his fifteen minutes of fame and died in the shadows as his fate intersected with Beethoven's. In her attempt to make a "shadow shine," Dove made a footnote in musical history a hero in her world and fleshed his existence in verse.

*Playlist for the Apocalypse* captures ordinary moments in the most extraordinary ways. It presents time as a continuum of past, present, and future of both the nation and the self of the poet featuring six sections which explore the representation of blackness across the spectrum of history both public and private. The volume maintains a sharp political edge that navigates "the vacillating moral compass guiding America's, and the world's, experiments in democracy" (Goodreads). In this volume, Dove presents a playlist of the everyday along with the nation's history over the past fifty years to preserve it for generations to come. Like a music playlist, the volume creates a dynamism of moving sound, subject matter and form as the poems move in certain constellations, brushing against each other and talking back, creating, and expanding meaning on topics that are meditated upon like the myriad meanings of the word ghetto (Dove 2022). In an interview with the New York Public Radio, Dove comments on the nature of the playlist:

as something that shapes a certain span of time you dip into it because you wanted to feel to be lifted and then down so you plan the emotional swing of the playlist musically and I thought this is really what I would like readers to feel when they are reading this book that is taking them on its journey and it will accompany them.

The volume displays an incessant sense of movement that dictates change as the new *modus operandi*. The movement suggested is both linear and horizontal recognizing the spectrum of time and the travail of humanity across it. In an interview with Margaret Quamme, Dove states that the objective behind the constant state of flux is to be able to locate the logic behind events today: "I wanted to start with the fact that you can look back, but you can also look forward, and things that happen in the past are, in a way, indications of what's happening today." She later refers to the poems in the volume as "an accompaniment" (Brown 2021) during the period of the pandemic, a time in which humanity was trying to fashion ways to get through it. The idea of being accompanied brings with it the warmth of sharing and companionship on a path that is unpredictably dreary and changeable.

The title of the volume, while acknowledging the sequential playfulness of a music playlist represented in song cycles, it maintains a cadence of vulnerability, desperation and finality brought about by the word "apocalypse" in the title. Goh (2021) comments on the nature of the "apocalypse" in her *Los Angeles Review* of the volume:

The use of the word “apocalypse” to mean the imminent destruction of the world, however, is a modern one, first recorded in the late 19th century. It is rooted in the Greek *apokalyptein*, to “uncover, disclose, reveal.” The last book of the *New Testament* describes prophetic visions of the end of the world — and it is known as the *Book of Revelation*, as much a document of John’s struggles with the dark nights of his soul as it is a vision of apocalypse. Another way of saying this is: Perhaps apocalypse is not so much about the destruction itself, but rather the shifts, disclosures, and revelations of the soul when our usual defenses are stripped away by catastrophe.

The volume presents “a lifetime of song” dramatizing Dove’s view of the idea of the apocalypse as both end and resurrection recorded in personal triumphs and pains as her stories meet with the grand arc of history in terms of both its grandeur and its incumbent weight (Garner 2021). Being a product of the violent events in Charlottesville in 2017 and later of the lockdown, the volume certainly testifies to catastrophe and the human response to it, not necessarily by way of finality and death but by the attempt to reconcile ourselves to whatever is changing around us in an endless cycle of tragedy and catastrophic failures of the human heart as well as of the redemption of the human soul (The Open Scholar). The sense of looming catastrophe created the silence that made a poet’s voice heard. It was from this point of forced silence that Dove found her voice anew into poems both joyfully playful and deeply disturbing.

The volume makes the best use of recording personal experience through the deft depiction of personae poems; poems that speak about the private history of characters whose fate has intersected with the grand arc of history. About personae poems, Dove tells Chet’la Sebree “every persona poem is an autobiographical poem, too. Though I don’t like to write about myself per se, I should amend that and say I don’t like to write an unfiltered self.” Her personae aim at building a bridge that brings history alive to the present moment (Oliver 2021). Such personae often find moments of grace and wonder in the retelling of a tale that was once silenced. There are instances of playfulness “laughing to keep from crying” that are clearly recorded in this section (Dove and Su 2021). Despite the darkness of the volume, there are truly funny instances that Dove captures in the *Spring Cricket* section and in *Ode to the Right Knee* that are influenced by the playfulness of language. Dove mentions that she was inspired by Shakespeare, Mad magazine, Bessie Smith, or a Corelli flute Sonata in the writing of the volume (Clarke 2021); a fact that supports its eclectic range of subjects and moods.

The volume starts with a dedication to the memory of Dove’s parents which reinstates the importance of history and remembering. Part one *Time’s Arrow* chronicles aspects of self and identity in the light of loss across a spectrum of time leading to change. *Bellringer* celebrates Henry Martin’s birth on July 4, 1826, as it coincides with the death of Thomas Jefferson; a historical instance that is synchronized with her personal quest for freedom. Henry Martin, a mulatto born into slavery in Monticello, rang the rotunda bell at Jefferson’s University (Virginia University) for fifty years. Dove conjures up this man’s life in the poem to locate “powerful moments of grace and resistance in the lives of those who have been oppressed and silenced” (Publisher’s Weekly 2021). The significance of Henry

Martin, a man who was otherwise insignificant, endows the volume with a proper historical edge commemorating the end of the shameful period of slavery maintained by Thomas Jefferson and the beginning of an era in which the servants of Monticello, the seat of power in Jefferson's time, emerge as masters of the house showing that blacks have agency over history.

This is my place:  
stone rookery perched above  
the citadels of knowledge,  
alone with the bats and my bell,

keeping time. Up here, molten glory  
brims until my head's rinsed clear.  
I am no longer a dreadful coincidence  
nor debt crossed off in a dead man's ledger;  
I am not summoned, dismissed-

I am the clock's keeper. I ring in their ears.  
And every hour, down in that  
shining, blistered republic,  
someone will pause to whisper  
Henry! —and for a moment

my name flies free (6).

About her choice of Thomas Jefferson and Monticello, Dove proclaims that “he embodied so many of the contradictions and the ways we have of overlooking those contradictions, the man both wrote some of the most famous things about liberty and the pursuit of happiness at the same time owned slaves ---I worked for the University of Virginia for many years and the embodiment of that ambivalence is something that I walk through every day” (The New York Public Radio 2021). The mention of his death announces the end of an era along with its ambivalences that the present attempts to resettle and to “emphasize(s) how history impacts us over time and how that impact shapes our livelihoods” (Hughes 2021).

Not only does Dove conjure up Henry Martin, but she also enters his aura and testifies to her authenticity of self as a timekeeper and a bell ringer who holds the power of reminder and commands order as she reigns in her unique aloneness over pinnacles of knowledge and glory. Bats in the poem call into being an inky night sky in the background which acts as a reminder of loneliness, trials and tribulations that eventually modulate into the light of victory harnessed by the power of will and intellect to claim a place for oneness among the ranks of the free as though Dove is attempting to re-own her history in a different light (Hughes 2021).

*Family Reunion* sounds the call for family togetherness and the importance of taste in life represented by an array of foods that represent the nourishment of body and soul. Dove introduces southern cuisine and the variety of accents that have migrated from the south to the Midwest as her extended family meets around the barbeque- all differences reconciled in the act of sharing a meal: “Pity the poor

soul who lives a life without butter— those pinched knees and tennis shoulders and hatchety smiles!” (9). Dove contrasts a life limited to healthy foods to one in which “resurrecting the food/ we’ve abandoned along the way/ for the sake of sleeker thighs” and concludes that the latter is a happier and a much more fulfilling style of life to the human soul. *Girls on the Town, 1946* is one of the lighthearted poems that Dove writes in memory of her mother, a woman whose elegance was unrivaled. The poem is about an outing that Dove’s mother had with girlfriends before she got married. The dressing was an important ritual that Dove records in the poem:

You love a red lip. The dimples are  
Extra currency, though you take care to keep  
Powder from caking those charmed valleys.  
Mascara: Check. Blush? Oh, yes.  
And a hat is never wrong  
Except evenings in the clubs.

The meticulous process of dressing up reflects a different standard of living when humanity was better connected, when it was important to make a good impression and to invest more time in the ritual of beauty. Dove underscores the tension that the volume builds by deflecting attention to a mood changing poem which takes the reader back to slower and happier times.

*Mirror* dabbles with ideas of self- reflection across the color line. Ideas of memory and shame come into play as the protagonist features self and reflection as a complimentary presence, then as subversion in the last question: “is Woe is -is Woe/ is me? - me?” (14). The poet clearly associates pain and suffering with the identification of the self-reflected in the eyes of otherness. The confusion about self and identity is echoed in the rhetorical question that reverberates across the spectrum of humanity at large requesting no answer but simply embodying one.

Matters of injustice are fully explicated in the volume which explores the meaning of “ghetto,” as first introduced in Venice in 1516 when the Jews were requested to live apart in a section in the principality known as the ghetto. *Foundry* is a political poem that samples “bites of glory” as it savors the real meaning of castaways of minority status like “Jew” and “nigger” as an existence that needs to be wiped out for the safety of the republic. In her notes, Dove clarifies the origin of the word foundry as the equivalent of ghetto and “refers to the island in which foundry slag was dumped before the Jews were forced to move there” (109).

You think surely  
there’s no harm in  
rounding up trash  
and hauling it  
to the dump where it  
won’t offend your delicate  
snub nose. You think  
as long as we stay where  
you’ve tossed us, on  
the slag heap of your regard,  
the republic is safe.



## OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

*Now you see me  
Now you don't. (26,27)*

The poem commemorates a project that Dove undertook in Venice since it housed the first ghetto in the world for the Jews. The project was to experience the ghetto and write something that would reimagine and revise the ghetto with all the permutations of the word (Dove and Mayson 2021). In an interview with Margaret Quamme, Dove reflects on the historical nature of the project:

After that, I felt it was comfortable to go through a very specific way in which time and history work with a section that deals with a ghetto, how a ghetto began with the concept of the word in Venice, all the way up through the concentration camps and our contemporary American ghetto and the ghetto that still exists inside people's heads in Black Lives Matter and all that.

The poem addresses racial matters in strong language that reenacts the wrong that was done unto minorities in the name of righteousness and safety bringing about a sense of forced invisibility and displacement. Segregation is the only answer “out of sight, out of mind” as Dove proclaims. White pride in this poem is tantamount to the erasure of otherness.

In *Aubade: The Constitutional*, Dove is grateful for “the miracles of living-breath, / a heart that beats, that aches and sings; even the ecstasy of thirst/ or sweat peppering my brow, /fanned by the mercurial breezes” (30). Dove questions her sense of unhappiness despite the continuity of the race as she rues “my lost/my sweet and damaged tribe” (30). Dove decides to walk the path with her “foot soles polishing the scarred stones” (30). The answer to depression is to keep going, to keep celebrating breath and heartbeat as a person manages to make the best of life. In *Sketch for Terezin*, Dove shares her dream of being “a comet/ a streak of spitfire consuming itself/ before a child’s upturned wonder” (34). In these lines, Dove presents the wish for self-sabotage encapsulated in the heart of a fire that self-consumes.

*Orders of the Day* investigates humdrum matters of life as they culminate into death. The finality depicted in “when at last our bodies crumbled/ in their final resting place” (35) imparts a sense of futility that accompanies strife through life. This poem places a tombstone on human pride that leads to divisiveness equating death with apocalypse as one of its definitions. *Transit* presents shards of Alice Herz Summers’ story of survival after she was captured in Theresien Stadt concentration camp which was a model concentration camp for composers, artists and musicians presenting the image of happy prisoners. The poem reinstates music as soul food, as it presents an entrance into a new consciousness of self as love and reinforcement. Music is presented in the poem as the power of life itself which ensured that Summers, the most senior pianist in the world to date, and a survivor of Theresien Stadt, made her pledge to life. In the poem, music is the color that painted taste on tastelessness, beauty on horror and nurture in the absence of it. Art according to Dove can perform the magic of healing the wounds of racism making

life livable.

This is the house that music built:  
each note a fingertip's purchase,  
rung upon rung laddering

across the unspeakable world.

the black water passing for coffee,  
white water for soup.  
We supped instead each night  
on Chopin, hummed our grief-  
soaked lullabies to the rapture  
rippling through. Let it be said

while in the midst of horror  
we fed on beauty—and that,  
my love, is what sustained us (36).

*Declaration of Independence* is a political parody on the Declaration of Independence as an attempt to start a new country of dreams and ideals. Dove recalls the pain of othering as a thorn in the side, “a pain that does not subside I laugh to forget, and the thorn deepens/ Excuse me, but what do vermin actually look like?” (37). The poem presents the denigration of blackness as vermin representing the uselessness of a debased state. Dove counters the state accorded her through race by sharing her view about herself as someone who escapes description in words that pigeonhole and confine. She is a woman out of the world “neither exotic nor particularly earthly,” “I was a child once; I belonged to someone” (38). Uprooted from life through the act of othering, Dove is alone with no one to claim her, with no one to belong to.

*Elevator Man 1949* reiterates the story of Dove's father, a graduate of Chemistry Department who had to work as an elevator man serving his white classmates who became his bosses in the company.

He sleeps on his feet  
until the bosses enter from the paths  
of Research and Administration—  
the same white classmates  
he had helped through Organic Chemistry.  
A year ago they got him a transfer  
from assembly line to Corporate Headquarters,  
a “kindness” he repaid  
by letting out all the stops,  
jostling them up and down  
the scale of his bitterness  
until they emerge queasy, rubbing  
the backs of their necks,  
feeling absolved and somehow  
in need of a drink (39).

The story is a prototype narrative that represents the sacrifices made by black people to survive. Black people are expected to stand on the hand and foot of whiteness and be grateful for the slightest kindness by making more sacrifices.

*Youth Sunday* is a poem that commemorates the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham Alabama, by members of the local Ku Klux Klan on September 15, 1963, killing four African American girls and injuring fourteen other persons (Playlist 110). The poem focuses on the girls whose lives were squandered by an undeserved act of hatred. At no time does Dove refer to the violence itself, instead the poem captures in deft minimalism the instances taking place before the bombing of the church. In her interview with Mayson, Dove proclaims that in the face of acts of violence that leave one speechless, she wanted to “remember humanity and combat helplessness. The girls haunted me.” Dove writes the poem from the perspective of those girls whose lives have been cut off. She pictures a day at the end of summer with its cool weather with Addie and Carol chattering about “leading the congregation,” dressed up “all in white like Angels” (40). The poem closes with a reference to the heavenly nature of the girls as though in preparation for their untimely passing: “My, don’t we look – /what’s that word the Reverend used in/last Sunday’s sermon? Oh, I got it: ethereal” (40).

*Trayvon, Redux* is a political poem about the infringement on the rights of blacks. It echoes Dove’s previous volume *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*.

This is what you’re thinking. Thinking  
drives you nuts these days, all that  
talk about rights and law abidance when  
you can’t even walk your own neighborhood  
in peace and quiet, get your black ass gone (42).

The poem races back to the sixties as it harnesses the power of the Civil Rights Movement and the underlying anger that fueled Rosa Parks and her fellow protesters to claim a denied right through peaceful resistance. Dove reverts to strong language to mark the threshold of change brought about by the Civil Rights Movement.

*Naji 14, Philadelphia* parodies Rosa Parks’ need for a bench on the bus, a right denied which eventually sparked the Civil Rights Movement in the Sixties. The need for a rest denied calls for a litany of the poet’s personal misery shared with her mother in “what a fine cup of misery/ I brought you mama- cracked /and hissing with bees” (45). Misery, according to the poet, visits home and mothers have their fair share of pain when things go wrong for their daughters.

They say we bring it on ourselves  
and trauma is what they feel  
when they rage up flashing  
in their spit-shined cars (45).

Others in the poem shirk the responsibility of the pain incurred on black people and mask their atrocities by claiming it is their trauma to deal with. Dove resolves the issue by making the speakers in the poem hoarse, with no power to speak their

truths. Until history takes a turn, silence is the answer opted for in the poem. *Ghettoland: Exeunt* is another poem in which Dove speaks about the anger that builds up as she finds nature as a pacifier. Wherever she looks, she is reminded by the sharp pain and anger that accompany the sense of self-pity:

You stop to gaze at the softening sky  
because there is nowhere else to look  
without remembering pity and contempt,  
without harboring rage (46).

The rest of the volume furnishes the resolution to the escalation of anger that it builds.

*The Spring Cricket* section is rife with explorations on the matter of “negritude” after the tradition of the Harlem Renaissance with musical jollity that conceals a soul drenched deep in the sadness that blues brings. Dove gives Aviva, her daughter the credit, for the presentation of the Spring cricket as a comic idea from childhood when she insisted “nobody loves me but the Spring cricket” (Dove 2022). As a result, Dove started to write from the point of view of the spring cricket. The spring cricket, comic as presented in some poems in the sequence, dabbles in matters political especially as a representative of the marginalized, he plays the pivotal role of the singer in the volume.

we just climbed. Reached the lip  
and fell back, slipped  
  
and started up again—  
climbed to be climbing, sang  
  
to be singing. It's just what we do.  
No one bothered to analyze our blues  
  
until everybody involved  
was strung out or dead; to solve  
  
everything that was happening,  
while it was happening (50, 51).

Dove reenacts a cabaret scene from the early Twentieth century in which singing the blues was second skin. The blues singer, the spokesperson for the entire black community, sings to keep from crying as the tale of wrongdoing ensues. Her attempt to remedy the situation may be rendered waste, but it holds relentless willpower. *The Spring Cricket's Grievance: Little Outburst* echoes the sense of resignation that often infects the soul as a result of achieving nothing. The cricket goes about his business complaining about being “Tired for singing for someone else/ tired of rubbing my thighs/ to catch your ear” (52) but, is nonetheless determined to make his show worthwhile “when the sky falls tonight/ I will stand on my one green leaf/ and it will be my time/ my noise/ my ecstasy” (52). The poem clearly echoes the determination in Langston Hughes’ *I too, Sing*

*America* in which the reinstatement of the black prince is inevitably foretold in legend and relived as a future reality.

I am the darker brother  
 They send me to eat in the kitchen  
 When company comes,  
 But I laugh,  
 And eat well  
 And grow strong

Tomorrow,  
 I'll be at the table  
 When company comes.  
 Nobody 'll dare  
 Say to me  
 "Eat in the kitchen,"  
 Then.

Besides,  
 They'll see how beautiful I am  
 And be ashamed -

I, too, am America (46).

*Postlude* is Dove's confrontational poem in the volume dealing with matters of invisibility of otherness: "you prefer me invisible" (56), "you wish me shushed and back in my hole" (56). Racial aggression and othering run all through the lines. However, the protagonist decides to pass judgement on herself through the eyes of otherness: "out of sight I am merely an annoyance/ one slim obstinate wrinkle in night deepening trance" (56). The poet, however, transforms the fate of the speaker by emerging as the hero who knows her business: "I've got ten weeks to croon through/ what you hear is a lifetime of song." (56). It is the commitment of this volume to sing a lifetime of song dedicated to the strong who never lose sight of their calling. The romanticizing of the song surely reflects on the emotion that runs through the volume- the need to share love with the world rather than denigrate those who do not fit the mold.

*A Standing Witness* is a song cycle of twelve poems that retells the history of America over the past fifty years in scathing tones including notable events like the assassinations of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. and 9/11. It presents testimonials to different political events across the spectrum of American history in the voice of a female witness, probably Dove herself (Martin 2021). This section chronicles moments in time dealing with the trappings of history and how by simply telling, one becomes captivated by the narrative. Dove refers to it as "a series of droplets in the stream of history" (Quamme 2021). In an interview with Chet'la Sebree, Dove shares her viewpoint about the song cycle and about the selection of Charlottesville as the setting for the section.

“A Standing Witness” is part of a song cycle. I was looking for touchstones in the history, but from a standpoint that was a little bit removed, so I didn’t want to concentrate only on Charlottesville in that section. The phenomenon of these white supremacists, and the whole mess of black lives being taken, and how this whole thing erupted, and how the United States, this country, was so unprepared for the violence that has been simmering under the surface — I wanted to get at the entire phenomenon. I wanted Charlottesville to be part of that matrix but not be thought of as the “only.” As someone who considers Charlottesville her home and who has lived here for all of these years, when that happened in 2017 I said, “Ah — this was a strategic move.” This is a sleepy college town. It could have been many other college towns. They picked a really good one because everyone here is not only complacent, they’re also very polite. In fact, probably as far as college towns go, it is more liberal than most, and therefore totally unprepared. The concentration on “what was it like” or “oh, Charlottesville, Charlottesville” ...I’m thinking, the more you say Charlottesville, the less you have to think about your own town.

The section was originally planned between Composer Richard Danielpour and Dove in 2017 as a libretto song cycle “bearing witness to the last fifty odd years of American History” (110) as Dove remarks in her endnotes to the volume. Music is presented as sustenance. Dove insisted that the poems stand for themselves rather than harness the power of the music written by the composer. They planned a world premiere for 2020 at the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts which never happened because of the pandemic. The history relayed in this section, according to Dove, is alien to the truth, since the truth in the volume “has gone walking/ left her porch for doves and ravens.” (59). Dove takes liberty to condemn the times “these are/ arrogant times/ Believers slaughter their doubters/ while the greedy oil their lips with excuses/ and the righteous turn merciless/ and merciful mad” (59). There are moments in the section in which it reads like a lament, a plea and a whisper that brings people around to listen closely (Brown 2021).

*You Tired, You Poor: First Testimony 1968* is a poem presented from the vantage point of the Statue of Liberty with her tall slate of proud promises as she observes “not-so-silently as the country destroys itself” (Boe 2021). Moreover, it deals with the burden of history as it questions the promises made by the Statue of Liberty. The poem presents a stirring testimony on the history of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Kennedy as Dove marks their cataclysmic deaths with an elegy in the form of a broken villanelle endlessly going back and forth in a relentless ritualism echoed in the rhetorical question: “who comforts you now that the wheel has broken.” The sequence starts with breakage and helplessness in the face of the realization that the wheel of life has broken with no sense of purpose. The poem elegizes loss and grief as “the constant now” with “hope that last word spoken” (60) in a stanza reduced to a single line thus reflecting the silence that shock brings. Chet’la Sebree comments on how the form of the poem echoes the subverted expectations and promises made earlier by the Statue of Liberty:

*Your Tired, Your Poor* --- begins like a villanelle, but then, instead of following through with the 19-line form, the speaker interrupts it, ending with the 16th line,

further calcifying how the wheel — the engine of the poem we know and understand — is interrupted and broken.

The repetition of the rhetorical question “who comforts you” is a painful reminder of a sense of enveloping loneliness, loneliness that is as sharp as a knife carving a way into the speaker’s heart. For not only is there breakage, but there is also no one to see clearly through these tough times. The poem commemorates a point when grief breaks down and brings about the end of a belabored stretch of time.

*Bridged Air: Second testimony 1969* attempts to heal through music the rift created by history as it prays for “peace to the Universe” (61). The poem commemorates the landing on the moon. *Giant: Third Testimony: Ali* reverts to the racial discourse of the sixties as it paints America’s black man Muhammad Ali as a denigrated other who deserves nothing but to be slayed for his ambition and his turn of phrase.

He’s our homegrown warrior, America’s  
toffee-toned Titan; how dare he swagger  
in the name of peace? No black man  
strutting his minstrel ambitions

deserves those eloquent lips:  
Swat him down, pin him to the mat!  
On and on they mutter, hellbent on keeping  
their own destiny unscathed

& brazenly manifest (62).

*Imprisoned Lightning: Tenth Testimony 9/11* commemorates the collapse of the two towers as an “episode” in which all viewers did not have the luxury of a response. The poem wails the loss of the many who worked at the World Trade Center which was later called “ground zero”- “a delicate puff”- a space of memory representing a rift in the history of a nation that nothing can remedy.

Something big was about to happen, was happening.  
No one had seen this episode before  
so we did nothing but stare  
as the second arrow struck (70).

*In Send these to Me: Eleventh Testimony: Obama*, Dove celebrates Obama as “America’s miracle, fruit of bold dreams and labor” (71). *Eight Angry Odes* thunder with Dove’s underlying anger at the world and her inability to change it. The section is written in sonnet form and starts with a quotation from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as Dove’s anger gathers like a hurricane that cannot be contained. Dove spoke to Chet’la Sebree about the necessity of giving oneself the license to anger that helped see her through the volume:

But that meant that I had to be polite. I think I couldn't finish that whole section because I hadn't given myself permission to be angry. It felt great to be angry. In fact, a lot of the book is angry. I don't think of anger as something necessarily destructive. It's just the emotion that comes out of a moment. In the "A Standing Witness" [section] poems, there's that resolve and that feeling [that] this is what happened in this country for the last fifty-plus years, and this is the unvarnished truth. Don't turn your face away from it. Now, what are you going to do about it?

*Pedestrian Crossing: Charlottesville* presents a powerful reason that rekindles her anger. The poem replays the violence enacted in Charlottesville before the statues were removed. It is interesting that the poem does not directly refer to the violence but breathes it silently as if it is about to burst open (Dove and Su 2021). Dove chooses to refer to Charlottesville because to her it is a symbol of the American dream (Dove 2021b). She chooses to introduce a group of impudent young girls walking around leading off Court square. The poem takes the reader to the place and space of violence, only to bite it off in an anti-climax:

I know my aggression- to lump them  
into a gaggle, silly geese, when all  
they are guilty of is being so young, so far" (78).

*Ode to My Right Knee* is one such poem that expresses the lightheartedness of the volume. Dove's playfulness starts with an impossible exercise that she assigned herself at her students' request to author a poem in which each line is dedicated to a different letter of the alphabet. This wild card practice has been a constant exercise in class, the result of which is a funny poem: "Membranes matter of factly/ corroding, crazed cartilage calmly chipping/ away as another arduous ambulation/ begins, bone bruising bone" (82).

*Shakespeare does not Care* envisions Shakespeare in the process of creating a sonnet which according to Dove is a side business coupled with "a playlist for the apocalypse" (84) as he manages to "live in his words" (84), an act best suited for a poet. Dove races poetry back to Shakespeare as she harnesses his power of prosody to aid her in the process of building a playlist that represents poets across the literary spectrum. Dove emerges as the heir who owns not only the word but also the history that she bore witness to since the dawn of time. The volume clearly bears witness to the poetic virtuosity of generations of writers before Dove for whom she holds the torch. Such a composite experience sings the joys and pains of generations who managed to make it through life.

*Little Book of Woe* is an introspective and meditative section that is ruled by darkness within as Dove attempts to reinterrogate the idea of time in personal terms. She deals with "the fear of personal extinction and incapacitation" (Quamme 2021) and with the changes of life caused by disease. Because illness makes a person alone and overwhelmed, Dove shows the reader in the volume that we are not alone. This section has biblical overtones as it ruminates over matters like reaching the end of life and what that means in terms of letting go. In this section, Dove opens up to the readers about the truth of her diagnosis with Multiple Sclerosis, a condition she likens to "a sword on the top of my head." For the first



time, Dove confronts her readers unmasked, sharing her vulnerabilities in the hope of finding companions in her struggle. About the reasons she did not wish to share her diagnosis with the world she tells Chet'la Sebree:

Another reason why I had not published a book was because I had to learn how to write again, in a sense. I've had multiple sclerosis for many years. I didn't tell anybody. One of the reasons I hadn't told anyone was because of my parents, who were aging and were very ill, and I did not want to burden them with this. I was handling it. The way my generation was raised, you tough it out and you make these things work. And I thought, *I'm handling it. It's fine.* I didn't want to worry them. They're both passed now. I was trying to figure out, in the midst of all this public life, how to write. One of the things that got affected with the MS was that I couldn't write by hand anymore, and that's how I always wrote. And so, I just thought, *Until I can figure out how to do whatever is necessary to write poems, I need some quiet.* Both of those reasons—the length of time it took me to do another book, but also the fact that I'm coming out with something that's very private, and I'm a private person.

Apocalypse, in this section of the volume, takes up new meanings. It is no longer that of a nation at large. It is an apocalypse as personal as it can get. *Soup* commemorates Dove's visit to the doctor in which she received her diagnosis. Instead of focusing on "falling into pity and helplessness" (90), she reverts to making soup "fit for the gods" (90). The kitchen has always been Dove's metaphor of survival with the "slow courage of the lentil as it softened, its heart splitting into wings" (90). Dove musters her courage as she compares herself to a lentil with its heart broken. Breakage in the poem is necessary for the magical metamorphosis into wings of a butterfly to take place. Wining and dining rather than whining about the news is Dove's winning way of transforming pain into the power of survival.

In *Blues Straight*, Dove chronicles the damage caused by the disease. A classical musician at heart who performs the Viola de Gamba, Dove finds her hands incapacitated to perform and her body breaking down:

One minute I'm up and running,  
and then I'm not.  
I smile. I nod. I practically beam.  
The cup of plenty runneth over,  
ruins my hands—  
I've scrubbed them,  
but they won't come clean.  
Strange, I know, to wish for  
nothing. A day  
to live through. A scream (94).

The nature of relapsing -remitting multiple sclerosis is unknown in the way it changes on a patient, which is part of its incapacitating psychology. Dove, like other autoimmune patients, thinks of the disease as a verdict that can hardly be averted, a monstrosity of fate that is as though conceived in the genes. The poems

reflect on MS as the writing on the body that cannot be erased or even modified. Loss of sensation is what Dove refers to as “the cup of plenty that runneth over.” The ritual cleansing of her hands commemorates the impossibility of steering her fate clear from it. Her days are encumbered with a persistent scream of fear, pain, and diminishment of self. It is the first poem of its type that Dove writes as she opens herself up to scrutiny as she studies the nature of the disease concluding “we live in mystery” (95).

In *Voiceover*, Dove shares the wisdom she has accumulated during her lifetime of creativity and pain:

Someone once said: There are no  
answers,  
just interesting questions.  
(Which way down? asked the dove,  
dropping the olive branch.)

If you think about it,  
everything's inside something else;  
everything's an envelope  
inside a package in a case—

and pain knows a way into every  
crevice (97).

Life according to Dove is a series of questions that may not have direct answers. It takes Dove a lifetime of song to deal with them despite their apparent simplicity. The sense of connectedness that Dove insists upon weaves a web in which fate is inescapable; pain knows its way into the human body no matter how hard one resists it. *Rosary* evokes a medical ritual tantamount to a supplication for good health and deliverance. The sense of ritual repetition is at once dizzying and incapacitating like the intent behind the swallowing of pills and the subjection to steroid injections. Seeking health is an arduous task like joining an impossible quest that focuses more on keeping count, studying method, and only then realizing that it is to no avail.

*Last Words* is one of the most touching poems in which Dove shares with the reader her vulnerability and ruminations on death:

I don't want to die in a poem  
the words burning in eulogy  
the sun howling why  
the moon sighing why not (101).

Dove fashions her death the best way she sees fit for a life of achievement. She does not accept pity in death even if it must be crafted as the most elegant eulogy that nature has ever known. Death beds are also not what she thinks would serve her best since that will be “a poem gone wrong” (101).

Let the end come as the best parts of living have come

Unsought and undeserved  
 Inconvenient  
 Now that is a good death (101)

In *Reve d'Ural*, Dove attempts self- definition in verse as she proclaims:” I am not a poem, not a song, unsuspecting” (103). She continues defining herself by negatives “I am not a river, exactly.” The incidence of negatives calls attention to the impossibility of the task she is undertaking, or at least so she thinks until she finally finds the proper words for the description: “A brown ordinariness/ a cup of coffee” (103). Dove’s sense of resignation and concomitant pride at being “a brown ordinariness” represents Dove’s expert crossing of the color line and attaining the X marks the spot, a point in which she is comfortable with who she is and with her pain.

*Playlist for the Apocalypse*, unlike its predecessors, represents a rainbow of public and personal expression of blackness that is quite unparalleled. The volume introduces an array of political and social poems that deal with violence against the color line as well as violence perpetrated against otherness including minority groups like the Jews in Italy. Violence is condemned in the name of purity or power while resistance against racism with all its crippling machinations is praised. Dove insists that such ruminations on race and on humanity at large are the ones that bring about either a doomed end or a resurrection that calls for a fresh start in life. Survival against all the odds seems to be a persistent motif in the volume. Going through the volume, the reader is reminded with the blues singer who is the historian of his people, a man who upholds the Harlem Renaissance motif of “laughing to keep from crying.” Unlike Dove’s other volumes, some poems in *Playlist* are presented as venting ground which Dove introduces as a springboard to help transcend the atrocities perpetrated against blacks through the creative power of writing and self-expression. Dove dexterously gives a cursory review of important historical detail that informs the historicization of blackness. Such historical moments appear as faint flashes that function as a reminder that these moments have been surmounted as a racial mountain. She also includes other stories that have never made it into history books and that would otherwise disappear. Because every moment matters, *Playlist for the Apocalypse* commemorates such simple and private moments as they emerge into a wider consciousness of the world.

Dove’s urge to outshine her greatness as a writer is nowhere to be found in the volume. Instead, the simple and happy resignation to be an ordinary person strikes a true chord that living one’s humanity, regardless of race or status in life, is the lesson learnt in this lifetime. Disease and death do not discriminate against black people, they come to white and black as a verdict that endows life with meaning. Dove concludes that life is precious and ought to be lived, cherished, and celebrated no matter how difficult it seems to be. It is true that the blocked stream produces the best song as does this volume. The volume celebrates the resilience of the human spirit, travelling between past and present in the hope of reaching out to a better future. The volume touches upon racial matters in ways that recount past atrocities while looking forward to a future whose sun shines bright over the darkness prevalent in centuries past. The volume attests to the creation of a new

black national script of empowerment that shuns hatred and embraces passive resistance, creativity, and beauty as its modes of expression creating a space of oneness for humanity at large.

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