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

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Abstract

This paper will explore Rita Dove's poetry as a symbolic transition from the protocols that defined African-American writing in the seventies to a postethnic questioning of prescriptive racial identifications. Taking as a theoretical framework the critical works of Gilroy, Hollinger and Steffens, the paper will analyze Dove's first collection of poems, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, as exemplifying a postmodern reformulation of questions of ethnic identity, cultural insiderism and the complex nature of racial memory. Positing that Dove's travels through Europe provide for a cultural and linguistic sensibility that is liminal in its repudiation of cultural ethnocentrism, it will argue that her writing foreshadows a postethnic decentering of race through "voluntary affiliations" (Hollinger). The paper will analyze how her experiences in and of Europe have lent her work a metaphoric inclusiveness that causes Kamionowski to term her a "cultural traveller", yet remain grounded in black aesthetics enough for Helen Vendler to call her a "proponent of Blackness". Foregrounding history as a personal, transcultural space where frames of memory are juxtaposed to reveal the constructed nature of racially informed identities and affiliations, the poems create what Steffens terms "artistic enspacement" (28), 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. The paper will examine how Dove uses history, myth and language in her poems to effect this transatlantic crossing.

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