

أصداء الحرية: قراءة في التمرد في قصائد دوف "من القلب إلى القلب"

و"بيسترو ستيكس" من خلال نظرية الانتهاك لفوكو

**Echoes of Liberation: Reading of Rebellion in Dove's "Heart to Heart" and "The Bistro Styx"**

*via Foucauldian Theory of Transgression*

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الكلمات المفتاحية: ريتا دوف، فوكو، الانتهاك، الانقطاع، من القلب إلى القلب،  
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**Keywords: Rita Dove, Foucault, transgression, Discontinuity,  
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### الملخص

إن تبني خطابا مناهضا للصور النمطية للنساء السود كان استراتيجية ريتا دوف

للدفاع عن حقوق شعبها، حيث استخدمت قصائدها لإعادة تشكيل هوية السود المبرمجة

والمفروضة عليهم من قبل مجتمع البيض. تناولت الدراسات السابقة قصائدها من قبل باحثين

متعددين. ومع ذلك، نادراً ما تم تناول خطابها الشعري المناهض في ضوء نظرية الانتهاك

لفوكو (١٩٦٣). ومن هنا، تبحث الدراسة في استراتيجيات تمرد الشاعرة في قصيدتي «من القلب إلى القلب» و«بيسترو ستيكس» (٢٠١٦) في ضوء نظرية فوكو. بعد إجراء تحليل نوعي وصفي، تستخدم الدراسة فكرة فوكو للانقطاع كأداة لتحليل البيانات. وتعتمد هذه الفكرة على مقارنة الافكار لخلق معارضة للخطاب المؤسساتي، والذي يستطيع من خلاله السود أن يحتفلوا بترائهم. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أنه من خلال التمييز بين وجهات النظر التقليدية وغير التقليدية، تمكنت دوف من إزالة الصور النمطية عن السود والتي تعتبرهم أقل شأنًا من البيض. تم استخدام تقنية المقاومة في "من القلب إلى القلب" من خلال تقديم تعريف غير تقليدي للقلب يتجاوز تعريف القلب كموقع للعواطف فقط. وبالمثل، تقدم دوف في "The Bistro Styx" شخصية بيرسيفوني على أنها امرأة أمريكية من أصل أفريقي متمردة تتحدى معايير الرجل الأبيض التقليدية وتختار أسلوب حياتها المستقل. ولقد أزلت الدراسة الغموض عن الافتراءات التي يصنعها البيض ضد السود، وعملت على مساواتهم مع أسيادهم المصطنعين.

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**Abstract**

Adopting anti-discourse against the stereotypical images of black women is Rita Dove's strategy to defend her people's rights. She used her poetry to reshape the blacks' programmed identity imposed by the whites. Her poetry has been visited by different researchers. However, her poetic anti-discourse is rarely tackled within Foucault's *Theory of Transgression* (1963). Thus, the study examines the strategies of rebellion of Dove in "Heart to Heart" and "The Bistro Styx" (2016) in light of Foucault's *Theory of Transgression*. Following a descriptive qualitative analysis, the study utilizes Foucault's concept of *Discontinuity* as a tool for data analysis. The concept relies on the contrast of two ideas to create an opposition for the main institutional discourse, through which the Blacks can celebrate their heritage. The study concludes that through differentiation between the traditional and nontraditional views, Dove de-stereotypes the blacks as inferiors to the whites. The resisting technique in "Heart to Heart" is presented via introducing unconventional definition of the heart that exceeds the heart's definition as a site of emotions only. Likewise, Dove in "The Bistro Styx" presents Persephone as a rebellious African-American woman who defies traditional white-man norms choosing her independent lifestyle. The study de-mystifies the white-made fabrications against the blacks, equalizing them to their made-up masters.

## Introduction

Humanity begins life with inherent freedom and equal dignity, yet societal divisions are based on factors like race, religion, and wealth often deface this equality. Such divisions permit those in charge to exploit the less fortunate, empower masters over slaves and fuel racial arrogance, particularly among whites towards blacks, leading to unjust outcomes. This mentality that drives society has motivated poets to address these injustices. Chapagain notes that African-American women suffer from a triple burden of racism, sexism, and categorization. As such, they bear discrimination, sexual oppression, and economic vulnerability in a racist male-dominated community. Their dual identity as Black and female subjects them to patriarchal suffering. Linguistically, English has linked 'blackness' to passivity due to its slavery roots contrasting with the positive connotations of 'whiteness' as a symbol of beauty and civilization (2020).

According to Drešerová, black women endure marginalization and oppression within American society. They are surrounded in cycles of poverty, weakness, and silence, battling for survival amidst both familial and societal pressures. The oppressive forces of patriarchy and racism intersect to dictate their economic, political, and ideological subjugation. These factors, converge to define the identity of African-American women, perpetuating their suffering under biased patriarchal norms that dictate their value and social standing. In terms of money, black women are taken as property by landowners and factory bosses. They have to work long hours for little pay due to tough social conditions. Politically, they are not given the right to vote or hold any political role. Ideologically, they are seen as symbols of submission, ignorance and shallow mindedness. These oppressions show how women are overlooked and unheard in society. So, the hardest part is

that African-American women have to accept these stereotypes and stay silent (2006).

Moreover, Minorities women often bear the poverty, childcare responsibilities, and inadequate opportunities of job. These difficulties primarily stem from gender and socioeconomic inequalities. They encounter racial bias in employment and housing in addition to high unemployment rates among minorities. Consequently, black women from minority groups find it harder to find temporary shelter in order to stay in need to men (Crenshaw et al,1995).

Williams explains that women have been exploited across various times and places. They suffer from kinds of trauma relating to psychological, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. For example, emotional abuse involving indignity, scorn, and degradation can remove women of their true identities in the sense that they represent shape more than content. Also, they suffer from domestic violence including beating, imprison them at home and specifying their roles in cooking, raising children, pregnancy...etc. These kinds of violence can force women to be distant from friends and family and make them feel that they are no more than slaves possessed by the racist-male authority (2023).

It's important to recognize how discrimination impacts women, leading to varying degrees of domestic abuse. Women with more money usually face less violence compared to those with less income. This emphasizes the effect of financial conditions and poverty on the type of treatment they receive in society. The historical legacy of slavery and the power imbalances between different groups reinforce the notion that Black women are seen as inferior and subject to control of the white authorities (Ba, n.d).

Group of poets, whether directly or indirectly, use their art to show the struggles experienced by African Americans in different fields of

life like politics, society or money. Their poetry is used as a potent tool for conveying messages about injustice, persecution, racial bias and class differences to societies and nations. Rita Dove is one of these poets. Her poetry explores a range of themes from black history such as personal experiences, discrimination based on race and gender and the challenges people face every day. Through her poetic expression, Dove endeavors to illuminate the plight of her community with a particular focus on the plight of women and raise a greater consciousness regarding the adversities African-Americans endure (Saboo, 2014).

Several studies have looked into Rita Dove's poetry. For example, Christopher's research titled "Race, Identity, and Perspectives of African American Women in the Selected Works of Toni Morrison and Rita Dove" explores the perspectives of African-American women in the works of Toni Morrison and Rita Dove. It delves into how these perspectives influence African-Americans' understanding of their identity in the United States. Additionally, it investigates how African-American women's viewpoints shape their perceptions of black American history and culture, aiming to empower them and strengthen their societal position. The study concludes that African-Americans play a significant role in American society, with their influence and actions being undeniable (2014).

Additionally, Jindal and Bhangu carried out a study called "Reclaiming History in Rita Dove's Poems," which looks into how Dove brings back the history of African-Americans and its impact in her poems. The study explores how Dove utilizes the past to shape the present and future by recounting the history of slavery, capturing the struggles, fears, and aspirations of the slaves, with the aim of instigating change (2018). Also, Hanna's study "The Black Aesthetic in Rita Dove's Playlist for the Apocalypse" seeks to show that blackness

is beautiful and valuable though the distorted vision of the blackness as a symbol of ugliness and ignorance. It aims to include black experiences in Dove's everyday life. Additionally, it sees Dove's idea of an apocalypse as a way to end individual suffering. The study suggests that despite life's challenges, it's important to find beauty and joy. Rejecting hate and embracing creativity and beauty can unite people and promote equality (2023). It is true that people may differ according to the place they live in or the origin they ascend from but this does not give certain group specific advantages rather than others.

### **Foucault: Transgression and Discontinuity**

Discontinuity is an important idea in Foucault's transgression as Rabinow explains that discontinuity is a vital means of analysis to form knowledge which determines the social activities of every historical era. Through shifting from one period to another, many discontinuities will be found, then, the societies try to reconstruct new discourses. The importance of these discontinuities depends on producing influential splits used to subvert the standards of the established system. According to Foucault, the discourses of language, labor and society are organized into disciplines achieving a high extent of constancy by those in charge. These systems are formed by laws of the institutions to send a message that they cannot be changed just like the laws of Nature. He illustrates that although the stability lasts for a long time, the discontinuity in history inevitably comes bringing norms and procedures that are different from the previous ones (1984).

In addition, Foucault elucidates that what makes history effective is its lack of stability. He likens history to a man and his body parts which cannot remain the same as in the following words:

History becomes “effective” to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being— as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our

body and sets it against itself. "Effective" history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending. It will uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting. (Bouchard, 1977, P. 154)

Discontinuity can be emerged through shifting from one era to another through which traditions, values and norms are not experienced, categorized, stated, characterized, described and known in the same manner that was common before (Foucault, 1971).

Foucault clarifies that discontinuity is an analytical tool for reshaping historical understanding in the sense that the past can be a topic of study when it is discontinuous, paradoxical and different from the present. According to Foucault, through time, some discourses will be emerged gradually and continually due to the aggregation of knowledge in society that leads to establish a new truth (O'Farell, 1993).

Foucault deals with the history of ideas to explain that circulating the anti-discourses come from finding gaps through comparing the stereotypical ideas and the transgressive ones. He contends that the traditional discourses are found by systems and procedures adopted by the institutions rather than viewpoints. So, the discontinuity is born through investigating the contradiction between different periods and ideas, but ultimately, it can be revealed via comparison only. The discontinuity, the raw material of history, is presented in various forms such as events, decisions, definitions, accidents, and discoveries, which need to be rearranged through analysis. This leads to the creation of the



anti-discourse which depends heavily on the contradiction (Foucault, 2002).

According to Foucault, these contradictions are considered transgressive trials to present opposing attitudes to the traditional discourse and expose its weak points. Moreover, the contradiction is very significant in supporting transgression to take a violent action against the disseminated discourses. The discontinuity, as a kind of transgression, is used to circulate transgressive discourses against the main ones of the past which are supported by the institutional system (Foucault, 2002).

### **“Heart to Heart”: Unmasking the Black Heart**

Dove’s ‘Heart to Heart’ (2004) of the American Smooth’s collection is written in the free verse’s form. In this poem, the poet tries to prove that the heart is no more than a muscle and not a source of love and emotions reveals the opponent discourse against the institutional discourse rooted in the American society. Relying on a single criterion in measuring objects and excluding others from giving their opinions is a systematic policy adopted by the whites to silence others. Attempting to confirm the male-typical definition of the heart in the poem proves the programed discourse of the Whites in the United States because they are privileged upon the Blacks in tackling issues. Mohammed & Hassan stated that “It is true that people may differ according to the place they live in or the origin they ascend from but this does not give certain group specific advantages rather than others”. (2023, P. 112)

The transgression in Dove’s poem is embodied through presenting an untypical definition of the heart which is considered a violation of norms of the American institutions. Its central theme is about the way of understanding the sentiment of the lover and beloved. It talks about the heart from Dove's point of view as a black woman. Usually, the

phrase 'heart to heart' refers to a deep connection between two individuals about their emotions, but when the reader goes on, he discovers two contrasted definitions of a heart. According to this contradiction, the concept of discontinuity relates to the poem.

The poem's narrator begins by challenging the stereotypical conception of a heart structured by the whites that the heart is the source of love and feelings:

It's neither red  
nor sweet.  
It doesn't melt  
or turn over,  
break or harden,  
so it can't feel  
pain,  
yearning,  
regret. (1-9)

Dove contradicts the common notion by saying "it's neither red", "nor sweet.", "doesn't melt or turn over, break or harden," and it "can't feel pain, yearning, regret". These characteristics mean that the poet portrays the heart literally:

It doesn't have  
a tip to spin on,  
it isn't even  
shapely—  
just a thick clutch  
of muscle,  
lopsided,  
mute. (10-17)

The heart is introduced no more than a “muscle,” and “lopsided.”. Although the heart is the center of sensations, it does not necessarily represent the feelings. The purpose of the poet is spreading a new belief about the heart that it is no more than an organ. The heart is just like black woman who is treated de-humanly in American society like a machine but she is neglected spiritually and mentally. She claims that the heart is not an accurate representation of our sentiments. By opposing the familiar definition of the heart, Dove wants to establish new views of the Blacks in society as a request for their freedom and way of thinking that must not be abandoned. Jemison argues that the African-Americans need to stick to their own visions because it is part of their life. She says “Don’t let anyone rob you of your imagination, your creativity, or your curiosity. It’s your place in the world; it’s your life. Go on and do all you can with it, and make the life you want to live” (cited in Fernández,2021, P. 4).

Another contradiction is seen when Dove says that the heart (muscle) is “mute”, but then she uses the word “sounding” to describe it as an organ pulsing in order to clarify the contrast in American society in living circumstances and the mode of thoughts between the Whites and the Blacks. The speaker emphasizes that she “feel it inside” as a physical organ only that pulses in all human bodies. The heart cannot guide the individual in making wise judgments since it is “mute” and cannot move outside its protective “cage”. This explanation transgresses the typical definition of the heart in the American society in referring black women who could not be creative unless they attain their freedom and independence out of the cage of America.

This vision reflects the gap in defining the objects between African-American women and White males who dominate the community. Also, this vision reveals the distorted relationship between the master and the slave and the oppressor and the oppressed in

viewing life issues. So, Dove's ideology concerning love is different from white man as a kind of resistance against the power of the institutions and the patriarchal system. Dove in this poem confirms that no single definition regarding the heart is universally agreed upon. Because of the discrepancy between the two definitions of heart, the transgression (the concept of discontinuity) occurs.

I want, I want—  
but I can't open it:  
there's no key. (21-23)

Although she loves someone, she cannot unlock her heart to him since they do not share the same definitions of the heart. There is no mutual vision (key) between them in defining matters, rather there is a gap. So, the heart is not a symbol of romance in Dove's viewpoint. This indicates the gap between the African-American women and the dominant group in thoughts, topics and definitions of the heart. Dove ends her poem by suggesting a solution saying:

it's all yours, now—  
but you'll have  
to take me,  
too. (29-32)

The last lines send an effective message that the lack of agreement in the interpretation of issues in society is a fact that cannot be denied. So, the only solution for her lover to win her heart is to accept her as she is with her opinions and beliefs. On the other hand, Rita Dove, as a Black woman, wants to send this message to the American society which White men dominate. American culture cannot be progressed, unified and fair only by accepting the ideas of black women. As such, Luther King states that the oppressed people must determine their fate and create their own discourse. He says "It is a marvelous development

and whenever oppressed people decide that they are gonna be free, there's nothing in all the world can stop them from being free" (Rieder, 2004, P.117). This confirms the failure of the powerful institutions that want to impose the white men's vision and establish one-sided definitions. At this point, the transgression of the African-American women against those norms is justifiable.

### **“The Bistro Styx”: The collusions of Ages**

Dove's poem 'The Bistro Styx' is written in the *Mother Love* collection (1995). In this poem, Dove uses Greek myth which talks about the girl kidnapped by the Hades in the underworld. The poem portrays the disordered relationship between Demeter (the mother) and Persephone (the daughter) which indicates the white-black relationship. Persephone gives up traditionality, refusing the patriarchal norms and embracing modernity. This refusal is a kind of transgression against the white male authority, segregation, laws and thoughts in the United States. Thus, the daughter rejects mother's attempts to retrieve her from the Hades who represents the modern civilization. The theme explores the vast chasm between the older and younger generations in the present world. Also, the poem deals with the traditions of the daughter's drinking and eating as modern habits rather than meaningful conversations with her mother. It depicts the clash between traditional and contemporary values. According to the contrast, the transgression against conventional norms used by the daughter is vividly shown. So, the concept of discontinuity is applicable in the poem.

This poem begins with the mother's negative description of her daughter:

She was thinner, with a mannered  
gauntness  
as she paused just inside the double  
glass doors to survey the room, silvery  
cape  
billowing dramatically behind her.  
*What's this,*  
I thought, lifting a hand until  
she nodded and started across the  
parquet;  
that's when I saw she was dressed all in  
gray,  
from a kittenish cashmere skirt and cowl  
(1-8)

The mother portrays her daughter as "She was thinner" to say that she is changed passively due to the rebellion against the social norms of the American society. The mother doubts her daughter's way of speaking, dressing, eating ... etc., who shows her refusal of her daughter's new habits through asking her directly "*What's this*" and "Are you content to conduct your life". The aim of the question is an attempt to silence her daughter through maintaining her traditional identity. The mother, here, represents the spokesperson of the White discourse, though she is Black, because it is not a matter of color or a mother-daughter relationship as much as it is a matter of norms and ideologies. Also, the mother still insists on having a hope to control her daughter gradually with "a motherly smile" by saying "But are you

happy?” applying the negotiation and the persuasion to retain the traditionality to keep the daughter powerless.

While waiting for her daughter to come back home, the mother could not recognize her daughter due to her contemporary appearance. The daughter crosses the parquet to her mother, and the mother observes that she is “dressed in all gray”. The color of the daughter's clothes could represent the invalid relationship between the mother and the daughter. This means that they are completely different in visions, evaluations and life style:

“Sorry I’m late,” she panted, though  
she wasn’t, sliding into the chair, her  
cape  
tossed off in a shudder of brushed steel.  
We kissed. Then I leaned back to peruse  
my blighted child, this wary aristocratic  
mole.  
“How’s business?” I asked, and hazarded  
a motherly smile to keep from crying out:  
Are you content to conduct your life. (10-  
17)

Besides, the mother observes the change in her daughter’s appearance, behaviors and culture. Her speech is artificial in the sense that she says “Sorry, I’m late” although she is not late. She is different even in her walking and sitting when her daughter throws “her cape” and does not slide “into the chair” normally. According to the examples above, the mother criticizes her new-styled daughter for transgressing the stereotypical habits saying “my blighted child”. For the mother, her daughter is destroyed and spoiled by modernity. The mother inquiries about the new lifestyle of her daughter through asking her directly “Are you content to conduct your life...” with “a motherly smile”. The

daughter replies that “Tourists love us. The Parisians, of course”— and they “are amused”. The daughter ignores her mother’s inquiry because she does not like questions, habits and persons that remind her with the traditional norms and the stereotypical images. So, the girl attempts to emphasize the significance and the value of her new life by stating that tourists who are “Parisians” love her. As an anti-discourse representative, the girl looks for freedom and independence through learning new thoughts, habits, styles, ... etc., which enable her to violate the white-made restrictions. These habits make her mother anxious because her daughter no longer accepts her norms. Through the uncomfortable dialogue, the discontinuity and contradiction between them are clear concerning their viewpoints of life.

Douglass, advises the Blacks to be well educated and have different opinions and thoughts from the traditional ones. This independence awakens their mentality and way of thinking through asking questions about the consequences of their continuous oppression which represents the first step of transgression. Douglass illustrates that African-Americans must be clever and creative in order to be qualified to break the boundaries of the societal norms structured by the institutions (Smith,2003).

The gaps between the mother and daughter and their generations are vast including food, drinks and tools of civil living such as: ‘a bone-white plate’, ‘fork’, ‘pink juices’ and ‘Wine’:

.....The  
Chateaubriand  
arrived on a bone-white plate,  
smug and absolute  
in its fragrant crust, a black  
plug steaming



like the heart plucked from the  
 chest of a worthy enemy;  
 one touch with her fork sent  
 pink juices streaming.  
 "Admiration for what?" Wine,  
 ..... (29-34)

The daughter's mindset and living send a message to her mother that she is satisfied with her models and the rituals of the city to the degree that she is ready to be "nude" in "appalling canvases".

The mother says "I'd like to come by the studio," and "and see the new stuff" to reveal an interest in accompanying her daughter to the studio to see how she lives in her new world. Then, the daughter faces her with "A delicate rebuff" saying "Yes, if you wish" deviating the discussion about the artist in the studio, his style of dress, and her own fashion choices. The aim of this irrelevant and meaningless talk, which is a kind of resistance, is to make the mother misunderstands her daughter's new world and reinforces her rejection of her mother's traditional world. Steffen states that making decisions and challenging the restrictions come from the inner faith of the individuals. So, through their internal voices, obsessions, observations, and behaviors, women are presented as being prepared to fight in order to win the freedom (2001).

The gap between the two contradictory worlds is increasing and the modern life changes the daughter radically even in the way of eating. Dove presents an accurate description stating that "She did look ravishing, spookily insubstantial, a lipstick ghost on tissue" which means when she cleans her lips after a meal, the tissue paper leaves a lips trace. Moreover, the modern kinds of "Fruit and cheese", "leaf-green dishes" and "crème" enhance the discontinuity, as a transgressive step, in norms and habits. The mother observes how much her daughter

eats and how many expensive dishes she orders which is likely a reflection of her French habits as a resistance to the mother's simple life and meals.

Despite the gaps between the two characters in all fields, the mother still tries to bring her girl back to her stereotypical state by inquiring her directly “But are you happy?.” The girl's response is “What? You know, Mother” even though she clearly heard her mother. Then, she swiftly returns to the topic of eating. The girl hints that she would not like to talk about the mother’s stereotypical norms because she gets fed up and transgresses them all forever.

Depending on the examples in the poem, Dove’s message through her daughter shows all the restrictions will inevitably end sooner or later. The girl is an example of transgressing the institutional segregating laws. Accordingly, the mother believes that it is impossible to force the girl to give up her new identity, which is achieved through her resistance to the limits imposed by white men. Therefore, the poet ends the poem with a key line “*I’ve lost her*” which is italicized to explain that her daughter is gone forever even though she physically exists. The italics, a technique in Dove’s language, represent the woman's rebellion against her stereotypical identity, the old way of thinking, village life’s ancient values and traditions. She favors fashion, contemporary lifestyle, modernity, ... etc., because the new life represents the freedom she looks for as Douglass suggests “LIBERTY was our aim; and we had now come to think that we had a right to liberty, against every obstacle—even against the lives of our enslavers” (Smith,2003, p. 243).

## Conclusion

The current study investigated the resisting discourse introduced in Dove's poems "Heart to Heart" and in light of Foucault's *Theory of Transgression*. Dove utilizes her poetry as a means of rebellion against the frames structured by the White racist institutions to profile the African-Americans. In terms of "Heart to Heart", Dove Presents unconventional poem which is an achievement for an African-American poet that explains the creative mentality of her people to offer alternative interpretations of the heart. She suggests that the heart is no more than a pulsating organ in the rib cage. This interpretation finds a discontinuity between the contrasted discourses which reinforces the counter discourse of the African-Americans; this means that they have a keen eye and able to present their own discourse away from the white- made one. While for "The Bistro Styx", Dove shows an anti-discourse against the white one through the great determination of the Black woman in choosing what she likes regardless the imposed restrictions. Moreover, the study concludes that Persephone's transgressive decision to choose her own lifestyle, completely different from her mother's traditional one, proves the discontinuity between them. It is an effective message to those in charge that African-American people reject the stereotype and they are no less important than their counterparts. The study also concludes that Dove's rebellious strategies goes in line with Foucault's ideas of transgression revealing that effective participation in the decision-making process and obtaining freedom requires rebellion against all prevailing ideas and restrictions.

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