

Navigating Anti-Discourse in Rita Dove's "Canary" and "Banneker" via Foucauldian *Theory of Transgression*

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ABSTRACT:

Fighting for the sake of self-realization becomes a goal for African-American people, particularly women. Those people have passed through unpleasant stages of stereotyping and devaluing by those in charge as part of maintaining the Whites' privilege. As an African-American poet, Rita Dove finds it a must for her to speak about oppression that her alike have passed through. For this reason, she devotes her poetry to reflect the real heritage of her folks away from the misrepresentation that those people have via the dominant discourse. Despite the considerable number of past studies that have approached the poetry of Dove through different perspectives, little ink, if any, is given to study her poetry in light of Foucault's ideas. Thus, the current study aims to investigate the resisting discourse utilized by Dove in two selected poems in light of Foucault's *Theory of Transgression* (1963). Moreover, the concept of Problematization in Foucault's aforementioned theory is used as a methodological tool in analyzing the poem. Two poems "Canary and Banneker" of *Dove's Collected Poems 1974-2004* (2016) have been used for data analysis to show how Dove problematizes the falsely created norms against African-Americans in order to present her anti-discourse against the white dominant society. As such, the study concludes that Dove through presenting two successful African-American characters, Holiday and Banneker, refutes the white-made fabrications that African-Americans are unaccustomed and of a low intelligence to compete a white man. Presenting Holiday as a brilliant jazz singer and Banneker as a genius scholar who made exceptional discoveries is a resisting strategy followed by Dove to show that African-Americans are brilliant and if they are given the opportunity, they can rival the whites.

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Introduction:

Naturally, all humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights. However, society often divides people based on factors like race, religion, and wealth, leading to distorted relationships. This division allows the wealthy to exploit the less fortunate, masters to dominate slaves, and fosters arrogance among white people towards black individuals, resulting in negative consequences. This situation has inspired poets to address these issues. African American women, as noted by Chapagain, face triple oppression – racism, sexism, and classism. They endure racial discrimination, sexual oppression, and financial vulnerability in a male-dominated society. Being both female and black means enduring suffering and pain in a patriarchal society. Linguistically, the English language has historically associated 'blackness' with ugliness due to its slavery-related connotations, while 'whiteness' is seen as a symbol of beauty and culture. (2020)

Yates explains that women have been victimized across various times and places. They are often perceived as mentally and physically weaker and are subject to psychological, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. This violence can force women to distance themselves from friends and family. For example, emotional abuse involving indignity, scorn, and degradation can strip women of their true identities. (2020)

It's worth noting how discrimination affects women, revealing varying levels of domestic violence. Women with higher incomes tend to suffer less than those with lower incomes. This highlights the role of financial status and poverty, affirming the unique position of Black women in American society in comparison to both white and Black men. The historical roots of slavery and the power dynamics between masters and slaves reinforce the idea that Black women are treated as second-class citizens, to be subjugated by white authority. (Ba, n.d).

Black women are disproportionately affected in various settings, including households, institutions, workplaces, and communities. They have suffered in their workplaces, often controlled by white families. For instance, they have been dehumanized to the extent that pregnant women were denied proper medical care during childbirth, causing both

psychological and physical harm. In sum, Black women become victims of domestic violence within an unjust system dominated by white power. (Green, 2017)

Many poets implicitly or explicitly utilize their craft to reflect the challenges faced by African Americans in various aspects of life, politically, socially, or economically. They employ poetry as a powerful means to send messages to societies and nations, addressing issues like injustice, persecution, oppression, racial discrimination, and class distinction. One such poet is Rita Dove. Her poetry delves into various themes, including black history, ethnic experiences, race and gender discrimination, complex relationships, and the struggles of individuals in daily life. Through her poetic language, Dove seeks to shed light on the suffering of her community, particularly women, and make the world aware of the trials faced by African Americans. (Saboo, 2014)

Numerous studies have explored Rita Dove's poetry. For instance, Wright's study, "Breaking the Boundaries: The Poetry of Rita Dove" (2020), challenges prevailing ideas about African-American poetry by using poetic techniques to amplify the voices of marginalized figures. The study aims to expand the horizons of Black poetic culture by investigating issues that were previously considered irrelevant to Black poets. Additionally, Phonglo conducted a study entitled, "Women and Work: Perspectives from Select American Poets" (2019), which delves into the concept of identity through the works of four American poets from the 20th century, including Rita Dove. The study focuses on the struggle to shape one's identity, the significance of work in women's lives, and the experiences of both black and white women in a male-dominated society.

Also, Dash and Upadhyay's study, 'Dynamics and Myth: Negotiating Greek Myth and Black Sensibility in Rita Dove's Poetry' (2017), explores how Dove employs Greek mythology to shed light on the suffering and powerlessness experienced by Black women. The study concludes that Dove uses Greek tales to convey the pain of all black women, demonstrating the timeless, archetypal value of stories that can be retold in new methods while keeping their proper meaning across time and cultures. However, the exploration of Dove's poetic strategies of resistance, within the context of Foucauldian *Theory of Transgression* to reclaim herself, to some extent has been overlooked in previous studies.

Foucault: Transgression and Problematization

Problematization is an idea which goes side by side with transgression. It is used to remove the conventional understanding of a subject in order to get new visions. According to Foucault's Theory of Transgression (problematization) is a noteworthy method used to problematize the conventional social discourses to construct counter-discourses. It exposes the relationship between transgression and existence. In other words, "Problematizations formulate the fundamental issues and choices through which individuals confront their existence" (Gutting, Foucault p.103). Problematization, then, is considered a method of transgression for understanding and assessing the problems and the way of reacting to them. It explains the framing of problems and the conditions which generate them. It is a transgressive idea which clarifies how individuals understand and how to respond to it.

In addition, Klymanska argues that the mass media plays a vital role in creating social problems around the rooted norms. The articulation of claims which come before the media is the first step in the process of problematizing the societal issues. The claim makers

(activists) use certain types of media such as newspapers, discussion programs and television to reframe the individual thinking in order to problematize the traditional norms established by the institutions of power (2017). Besides, Hurley believes that Foucault elucidates that problems are the main topic in his work 'problematizations' and every problem has various responses from others. So, the 'history of ethical problematizations' is a kind of problematization because it depends on self-practices of these moralities according to the society in which the individual lives (1990).

In an interview with Foucault, he clarifies that the history of thought can be known via problematization depending on behavior, point of view and mentality. Accordingly, thought is a kind of transgression because it permits the individuals to be detached from the traditional action, mode and response through prompting him to tackle it according to his condition, questioning and purpose. Thought means the freedom of what one wants to do. It means that the individual is free to separate, construct and deal with it as a problem (Rabinow 1984).

Foucault argues that problematization deals with investigation of history about a historical existence of who we are today. In this regard, transgression means a mode of thinking produced as a result of the method which depicts the way of living and thinking in any society. The development of thinking enables the individuals to separate and differentiate their beliefs from the contemporary state of thinking. The new state which makes them as they are now aiming to change their way of thinking which is found at present. This means that new circumstance is created in order to help them to think differently from the former relation to history (Rabinow 1984). Foucault confirms that problematization is inventing problems and suggesting some questions around them in order to make them controversial which finally leads to certain understanding. So, it is a kind of transgression which has a ability to fulfill some practices and prohibit others.

Transgression in Dove's Canary

Dove's poem 'Canary' portrays the life of Billi Holiday, an African American jazz singer. It is written in Dove's collection *Grace Notes* (1989). The title refers to Holiday as a delicate African American woman who is like a singing canary in a cage in referring to an African-American woman who is imprisoned by the American society. Despite being a successful, she spends her life in melancholy and sadness. The poem is written in free verse to create a free space that enables the poet to convey her ideas effectively. As such, the concept of problematization can be applied in this poem to problematize the deep-rooted stereotypical idea in the American society that black woman is a symbol of irrationality, ignorance, uselessness and submission. Through this concept, some questions are presented concerning these labels in order to transgress them and to reveal the brilliant hidden side of the black woman.

Michel Foucault explains the vital role of transgression in the cultural and social life, especially the way of thinking. He clarifies transgression in his essay "A Preface to Transgression" as the following:

Perhaps it is like a flash of lightening in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the

night from inside, from top to bottom, yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity. (Bouchard, 1977, p.35)

Through the quotation above, Foucault prompts the individual to look at the dark side of human life in order to illuminate the emergency for creating a change. Transgression is produced as a light in the dark world, that it is a very important step to expose the limits for individuals in order to cross them. Foucault praises the oppression (the dark) for giving the transgression the justification to be born.

The poem starts with the description of Billie Holiday:

Billie Holiday's burned voice
had as many shadows as lights,
a mournful candelabra against a sleek piano,
the gardenia her signature under that ruined face. (1-4)

She succeeds in changing the racial pain by indulging into music as her discourse of survival. Her name "Holiday" is suggestive in the sense that she is always happy and optimistic despite her pain, "burned voice". In addition to her pathetic childhood, there are "many shadows as lights" trying to problematize the established beliefs of the patriarchal society. Her life as "a mournful candelabra" which melts gradually because of the white men torture and persecution despite of having a musical sense indicating to "a sleek piano". She then has the ability to become a famous singer rejecting all these wrong beliefs against women. Dove explains that the mutual happiness and pain is rooted in her childhood and her personality. So, this elucidates the psychological and intellectual exhaustion in referring to the tragic conditions she lives in. Despite the sadness covering her face, she wears the gardenia which is a symbol of beauty as a dominant sign as in "the gardenia her signature under the ruined face".

Dove uses the juxtaposition to expose Holiday's talents and insistence to wear a flower to transgress the negative portrayal and the sadness imposed by the white men aiming to redefine herself because she believes that the world, she lives in is not an ideal one and she starts looking for a fairer society where she and her alike get their rights regardless of their race or gender. Therefore, Holiday strives to reach that world (the world of freedom) that she is inspired of. As suggested by Barbara Smith that "The women of the C.R.C. believed that another world was possible, one in which Black women, and thus all of humanity, were freed from systems of oppression and exploitation, as the result of a collective struggle that reached down to the roots of the problems we face" (Taylor para 21).

Additionally, the words "magic spoon" and the "magic needle" are tools used in cooking and sewing but at the same time they are used by, Holiday, to create a kind of music by her creative mentality. (Proitsaki, 2017). The purpose is to show the hidden talents of the black woman through investing her ability to compete the white man in the American society if they are given the opportunities. Thus, this action aims to pave the path for transgression to break the boundaries through Foucault's concept of problematization. Holiday, here represents a resisting discourse that aims to change the fallacy created by the white dominant group against African-Americans. Such resistance for Luther King represents the conflict with the whites which is not personal but between justice and injustice. (Rieder, 2014)

Moreover, Transgression is the main element of Foucault's philosophy. It opposes the institutional narratives and offers a unique language that can be used as a means of transgression. He says "perhaps one day it will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought" (Bouchard, 1977, p. 33). Also, Jenks (2003) illustrates that transgression recognizes the boundaries and calls for transgressing them. Transgression is not only transgressing the borders, but it is a "dynamic force in cultural reproduction - it prevents the stagnation by breaking the rule and it ensures stability by reaffirming the rule" (p.7). The duty of the transgression is to subvert the restrictions and social norms and to reconstruct the human identity creating another social systematic structure. So, the transgression is not chaotic, in turn, it is urgent to know the structure of the system in order to distinguish the boundaries to trespass them; "Transgression is not the same as disorder; it opens up chaos and reminds us of the necessity of order. But the problem remains. We need to know the collective order, to recognize the edges in order to transcend them". (Jenks, 1977, p.7)

Fact is, the invention of women under siege
has been to sharpen love in the service of myth.
If you can't be free, be a mystery. (9-11)

These lines summarize the problems of black women in facing prostitution, poverty and misuse because of the blockade of the racial American society that is programmed by the powerful institutions. So, it is not easy to transgress the boundaries radically and directly.

Consequently, the anti-discourse is the outcome of the racist male boundaries. So, Foucault argues that there is a mutual relationship between transgression and limit. This relationship cannot be isolated in figuring out these two concepts and if one does so, they may seem absurd and useless. Their meaning can be emerged from the unavoidable clash and violence between them. Through the juxtaposed relationship between the two elements, it is obvious that the strength comes from the threat of each element to obliterate the other. This explanation is exposed in the following quotation:

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them. (Bouchard,1977, p. 33-34)

To "be a mystery" is Dove's strategic suggestion to encourage women to transgress boundaries and refuse to conform to the negative ideas stereotyped about them as black women through mystifying themselves for the sake of being a point of interest. According to the problematization concept, Holiday can redefine herself by being a riddle "a mystery" to stimulate others to investigate her. In this case, she can present herself to the world through her eyes not through the eyes of the white men. Consequently, the poem is Dove's

advice for women to be free from the societal restrictions that limit their individuality and freedom. Dove sees in the line above (the concept of the singing bird in a cage) a woman who challenged the stereotypes and mythical representation of femininity "the service of myth" as weak, fragile, and subservient. To claim her status as a hero, "Holiday" demonstrated her strength and determination (Steffen 50).

Transgression in Dove's Banneker

'Banneker' is Dove's poem written in the collection entitled Museum (1983). It begins with the disfiguration of Banneker as a sample of the black people who is portrayed as a symbol of uselessness. This picturing aims to humiliate him in order to subjugate the blacks mentally. Banneker (the astronomer) is accused of being a loiterer who spends his time lying on the ground covered with a dress and looking at the sky. The question at the beginning of the poem is utilized to enhance the impression of the white people that a black man, though a scientist, cannot have the analytical thinking of a white man.

Benjamin Banneker is the first African-American (1731-1806), who began his studies in the latter half of the 18th century. He accurately foretells the occurrence of a solar eclipse and publishes an almanack (a record of the months and days of the year together with astronomical observations, projections for the climate and suggestions for farming). Banneker is presented in the first stanza as no-action man "lying" only and watching the stars. Then, he is given the scary attribute as the "good people of Baltimore" are afraid of his actions. Using the words is a powerful means of language in Dove's poetry to expose the oppression of the blacks. As such, using the word "good" is to refer the folk of Baltimore who embraced the racial discrimination in their mind means that their counter (Banneker) is portrayed as a bad character. Dove sends messages to her readers that they are victims of the white's language because it is made by them. They spread rumors about his strange behaviors spending the night alone on the field observing the sky.

What did he do except lie
under a pear tree, wrapped in
a great cloak, and meditate
on the heavenly bodies?
Venerable, the good people of Baltimore
whispered, shocked and more than a little afraid. After all it was said
he took to strong drink .
Why else would he stay out
under the stars all night. (1-10)

the question raised at the beginning of the poem is strategized to enhance the beliefs in the mind-set of the white people that a black man, though a scientist, cannot have the mentality of a white man. White people portray Banneker as a loafer spending time in outdoors drinking wine. They asked "why hadn't he married?" and "who would want him!". They ignore his intellect, considering him to be inferior, not part of Baltimore and unworthy of respect. Simultaneously, it enhances the black people's belief that they cannot possess the competence and creativity enjoyed by their rivals, the whites. These claims against

Banneker's frame of mind as unfit and unintelligent are intended to brainwash and mute the group of the black people. It is a kind of an ideological occupation of the black's mind.

In this poem, Dove highlights the stereotypical representation on Banneker at the beginning of the poem then, she introduces her counter-discourse to the offensive attempts of minimizing the black mentality via presenting un-stereotypical character of Banneker who stands as a violation to the norms and definitions of the white man's culture. Dove utilizes this character to introduce her rejection to the frames and stigmas attributed to the black people and their mentality. The segregation against the gifted black people dominates the poem.

Accordingly, the influential way to regain the real identity of the blacks is to violate all the restrictions imposed by the whites. In his essay, "A Preface to Transgression", Foucault defines transgression as a "word which surpasses all words or any dear sense that it places us at the limits of all possible languages" (Bouchard, 1977, p.33). Through these words, he wants to expose his refusal to the common definitions popularized by everyday language in order to create new ones via circulating a new discourse.

Thus, Dove praises the character of Banneker in the poem to transgress the American institutional segregating laws. This goes in line with the Foucauldian concept of problematization which aims to problematize the rooted comprehension in the American society that black people are ignorant and narrow-minded. The concept of problematization is a key thought that defines the essential issues and choices that people face in their lives. The existence and definition of the individual in the society is determined by the power relations of the institutions. Accordingly, the concept of problematization matters in its possibility of the reproducibility of the black man's identity in the racist American society (Gutting 2005). Dove reveals this concept through exposing a gifted African-American astronomer, Banneker, who plays a significant role in achieving scientific discoveries that are not done by any white scientist. Banneker's representation problematizes the definition of the dominant discourse against black people. In this way, Dove transgresses the stereotypical representation through celebrating his poetic talent in contemplation and his broad imagination:

a capacious bird
humming as he penned in his mind
another enflamed letter
to President Jefferson— (14-17)

Dove rejects these misconceptions and rumors within American society. She portrays him as "a capacious bird" who wants to break the cage of slavery to get freedom through his skills, knowledge and intuition. Slavery is a weapon used by the white groups to limit the active spirits of the blacks. In turn, exposing the black's good merits such as (cleverness, singing, musical sense dancing...etc.) represents a counter-discourse against the discourse of slavery. Douglass said "I admit that the slave does sometimes sing, dance and appear to be merry. But what does this prove? It only proves to my mind, that though slavery is armed with a thousand stings, it is not able entirely to kill the elastic spirit of the bondman". (2003 p. 359)

Banneker is represented by Dove as a black man who foresees the solar eclipse in comparison to the white man who could not do. In addition to his success to be a brilliant astronomer, his bravery is shown through his fight against slavery and for achieving civil rights. He goes further and sends an "enflamed letter" to the Secretary of State of the United States, Thomas Jefferson calling for the equality of African Americans with their white counterparts (Britannica Encyclopedia). Banneker is presented as a gifted and intuitive person that he "imagined", "the reply" of Jefferson's supportive response to his request which shows that African- Americans have insightful minds.

Through Banneker, Dove encourages black people to adopt resistance as a technique to break the racial boundaries imposed by the dominant group by presenting their talents in all fields as a prerequisite for freedom in order to problematize misconceptions. This goes in line with Luther King when he states "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed" (Rieder 2014 p. 68).

Moreover, the poem's use of the terms: 'black' and 'white' is intended to shed light on the oppressive notions of the English language used by white men. Dove believes that language is used by whites to stereotype African Americans. In this language, the white is represented as the source of light and optimism which illuminate the world while the black is given the image of darkness and pessimism.

— a white-maned
figure stalking the darkened
breast of the Union— (34-36)

Again, Dove utilizes Banneker's voice to describe how language is used as a symbol of transgression (the concept of problematization) against the violence in the battle between the oppressor and the oppressed. She wants to reclaim the real identity of black people and to help them to rediscover their real heritage through resisting the white-made language.

The poem appreciates Banneker's sense of belongingness and his determination to regain his folks' rights through the image of a man who holds "his rifle" and "shot at the stars". Finally, the poem tries to problematize the deep-rooted misconceptions of black people. Moreover, it portrays Dove's utilization of her poetic language as an influential tool of transgression through problematizing the depiction of Banneker as an African-American person to inspire further actions towards getting racial equality.

Conclusion:

The current study investigated the anti-discourse presented by Dove in her poems "Banneker" and "Canary" through the lenses of Foucault's *Theory of Transgression*. The study concludes that Dove has utilized her poetry as a weapon to fight against the socially created fabrications against the African-Americans. Through Dove's use of two talented characters, it is considered a triumphant in increasing awareness among African-Americans. The success of both Holiday and Banneker aims to show that those people are qualified and gifted. Such portrayal plays a significant role in promoting an anti-discourse to the prevailing white one which always tries to devalue others. Holiday as a jazz singer with a sweet voice

builds a free discourse by problematizing her issues through introducing her intelligence and brilliant characteristics. It is then, intended to send a message for white racist people that talent is not exclusively achieved by whites. Besides, Banneker's anticipation of the solar eclipse is a transgressive event introduced by Dove against the white people boundaries imposed on the blacks as an ignorant mass. Banneker's unique discovery is comparable with Foucault's demand that redefining the black people identity is achieved through circulating Self-originated thoughts.

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الاجار في الخطاب المضاد في قصائد ريتا دوف "كناري" و"بانكر" عبر نظرية فوكو للتجاوز

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ملخص البحث:

يصبح النضال من أجل تحقيق الذات هدفاً للأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي، وخاصة النساء. لقد مر هؤلاء الأشخاص بمراحل غير سارة من الصور النمطية والتقليل من قيمتهم من قبل المسؤولين كجزء من الحفاظ على امتيازات البيض. باعتبارها شاعرة أمريكية من أصل أفريقي، تجد ريتا دوف أنه من الضروري لها أن تتحدث عن الاضطهاد الذي مرت به على حد سواء. ولهذا السبب تكرر شعرها ليعكس التراث الحقيقي لشعبها بعيداً عن التزييف الذي يحمله هؤلاء الناس عبر الخطاب السائد. وعلى الرغم من العدد الكبير من الدراسات السابقة التي تناولت شعر دوف من خلال وجهات نظر مختلفة، إلا أن القليل من التركيز، إن وجد، قد اعطي لدراسة شعرها في ضوء أفكار فوكو. ومن هنا تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تقصي الخطاب المقاوم الذي استخدمه دوف في قصيدتين مختارتين في ضوء نظرية التجاوز لفوكو (1963). علاوة على ذلك، يستخدم مفهوم الإشكالية في نظرية فوكو المذكورة كأداة منهجية في تحليل القصيدة. تم استخدام قصيدتين "كناري وبانكر" من قصائد دوف المجمعة 1974-2004 (2016) لتحليل البيانات لإظهار الكيفية التي تثير دوف من خلالها إشكالية المعايير الخاطئة التي تم إنشاؤها ضد الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي من أجل تقديم خطابها المناهض للمجتمع الأبيض المهيمن. وعلى هذا النحو، تخلص الدراسة إلى أن دوف من خلال تقديم شخصيتين أمريكيتين ناجحتين من أصل أفريقي، هما هوليداي وبانكر، تدحض الافتراضات التي صنعها البيض بأن الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي غير متطورين وذوي ذكاء منخفض لمنافسة الرجل الأبيض. إن تقديم هوليداي كمغنية جاز لامعة وبانكر كعقري حقق اكتشافات استثنائية، هو استراتيجية مقاومة تتبعها دوف لإظهار أن الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي رائعون وإذا أتاحت لهم الفرصة، فيمكنهم منافسة البيض.