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# Beyond Ethnic Margin and Cultural Center: Rita Dove's "Empire" of *Mother Love*

Therese Steffen

"Meiner Ansicht nach kann keine Beschreibung europäischer kultureller Identität und Kunst die Beziehung zwischen Kultur und Imperium einfach ausser acht lassen.

Mehr noch, so wie Kultur und Imperium in vielerlei Hinsicht miteinander verknüpft sind, wird auch die Kunst selbst in einem sozialen Kontext praktiziert und fortgeführt, in dem Macht-, Eigentums-, Klassen- und Geschlechterbeziehungen zutiefst miteinander verflochten sind."

[“In my opinion, no description of an European cultural identity and art can simply remain indifferent to the relation between culture and empire.

Still further, as culture and empire are in many ways interconnected, so art itself is being practized and continued in a social context, in which issues of power, ownership, class, and gender are deeply linked.”

— Edward W. Said, “Kultur und Identität. Europas Selbstfindung aus der Einverleibung der Welt.” *Lettre International* 34.3 (1996): 21-25.

## Empirical ruminations on empire (from a marginal perspective)

A binational Austrian Swiss conference on empire is not devoid of delicate ironies. Thanks to postcolonial discourse, the libertines beyond Austria's westernmost border convene to review notions of empire with their historical arch enemy. I favor the behavioral definition of empire “as effective control, whether formal or informal, of a subordinated society by an imperial” one (Doyle 30). Today, a range of democratic joint ventures are at work, e.g. in the skies of Swissair and Austrian Airlines, or at the less congenial bottom end of ethnic joking on each other's cultural superiority, inferiority or rather,

similarity. After all, we are both mountain people, skiing down from those hills which, in 1315, offered strategic advantages for the rock-and-tree-throwing Swiss over a sophisticated Austrian cavalry. Rough Yahoos or imperial Houyhnhnms: We share an important postcolonial consolation. Both countries banished the house of Hapsburg which moved from Alsatia, “the El-sasz, or foreign territory” (*OED*) to the Swiss Canton of Aargau, and eastward ho! The Hapsburgs, foreigners themselves, turned into sovereigns and outcasts again, from margin to center and back.

### Empire: a critical cultural construct

Within the theory and practice of postcolonial, or emergent literatures (Wlad Godzich), empire as a cultural construct denotes the informal rule of effective cultural dominance. This definition follows popular usage. Neither popular nor scholarly convention, however, is clear as to whether a historical definition of empire should include only territorial conquest and formal legal transfer of sovereignty or also the informal rule of effective cultural dominance (Doyle 30). In terms of legal sovereignty, empire first and foremost refers to what has been known as the British Commonwealth. From margins as various and far as India, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, the South Pacific, the West Indies, Africa and Canada, “the Empire writes back to the Centre,” Salman Rushdie maintains. My first caution points to the two notions of the term empire, invariably confused in postcolonial discourse, that need to be distinguished: empire as the absolute center, or centralizing, centripetal supreme power structure, and empire as the peripheral, or centrifugally scattered yet culturally empowered product of imperial expansive strategies as in Rushdie’s usage. Crucial to my reading of the African American writer of Cherokee descent, Rita Dove, is the interaction between the two concepts. Safely moored in her colored community, as well as in the US American culture at large, she fuses central and peripheral issues beyond notions of center and margin. For as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue in their landmark survey of post-colonial literature, *The Empire Writes Back*, the “major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity – [we could add its creative solution] – comes into being” (8).

The second caution that I feel obliged to proffer concerns the width or narrowness of the theoretical trajectory. In view of more recent fiction and theory, empire as a critical point of reference must be questioned and

redefined. How else can the USA, "the first post-colonial society to develop a 'national' literature in the late eighteenth century" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 16) officially participate in a pluricultural dialogue that the country helped to establish in the first place? How do center-margin relations other than British which nonetheless produce literatures in English (e.g. The Netherlands and Indonesia, Israel and her diaspora) fit into the narrow critical framework? How do US American minority writers renegotiate their stance against mainstream cultural supremacy on the one hand and within the diversity of First and Further Worlds on the other?

Empire as a postcolonial critical term, I dare say, threatens to become as much of an empty cipher as has been the fate of that sorry concept, postmodernism. That may, of course, be the destiny of "post." In an essay entitled "Is the 'post' in postmodern the 'post' in postcolonial?" Anthony Appiah finely delineates the differences between the two discourses and argues eloquently for their ability to create – or clear – discursive spaces within the current discussion. My reading of Rita Dove's cultural "empire" beyond clearcut concepts of center and margin<sup>1</sup> will highlight the conflation of the personal and the mythical, the regional and the global in her sonnet sequence *Mother Love*.

### Rita Dove's positionality

Rather than arguing from their racial, social or gender specific peripheral perspectives, writers like Michael Ondatje, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ishmael Reed, or Rita Dove create their own pluricultural and transcultural realm in which they embody and cultivate both "métissage" – i.e. the fusion of different races – and "créolisation" – i.e. primarily the blending of languages and cultures. Out of this hybridity emerge artistic "empires" that seek to migrate around the world at will. Theirs is a *Decolonizing [of] the Mind* unlike Ngugi wa Thiong'o's retreat into his native Gikuyu and his bidding farewell to literature in English. These writers in English also embrace Yoruba and Japanese (Ishmael Reed), or European, particularly German and Greek culture in the case of Rita Dove.

Her recasting of the Demeter-Persephone tragedy of loss, erotic initiation, and seasonal change in *Mother Love* is used to investigate the value of myth as a perennial interpretative device. Crucial to our discussion of empire is

<sup>1</sup> Center and margin as critical terms have gained eminence with the work of Jacques Derrida, for whom they indicate constructed limitations embedded in a process beyond binary and hierarchical oppositions.

Dove's redefinition of cultural space: Whereas the mythical abduction is played out on a vertical axis of "upper- and underworld," this worldly modern version develops horizontally between the stereotypes of an innocent America and a Paris of erotic experience. Yet the lyrical self, overriding Jamesian or Baldwinian dichotomies of innocence and experience, ultimately speaks from a Third World position, from the open skies of Mexico. They emerge as an elevated realm of artistic observation and creation beyond established centers and margins.

### An "empire" beyond center and margin: Rita Dove's *Mother Love*

Rita Dove's poetical concerns – the magic of words, the polyphony of voices, and an artistic third space growing out of a reinterpreted tradition – are as finely tuned in *Mother Love* (ML 1995) as in her Pulitzer Prize winning *Thomas and Beulah* (1986). No longer writing directly about her family the way she did there, she bases her lyric sequence on myth and at the same time transforms overdetermined source material into something deeply personal. The result is a Demeter-Kore/Persephone plot in a contemporary setting and idiom in which Rita Dove as a daughter-mother-poet remembers and deploys all the voices and stages of sacrifice and metamorphoses she can imagine: protagonists, a chorus of witnesses and bystanders, wiggling tongues, the Olympians. While the Greek model features a white girl in a dark world, *Mother Love* highlights a dark girl in a white world.

Rita Dove drives us along a maze of thirty-five poems in seven sections, mirroring the seven seeds of the pomegranate. Seven times two equals the sonnet's magic number of fourteen lines. Yet in giving her audience but half of the whole, she keeps the cycles of both sonnets and myth open to recreation. Except for Section III, counted as one poem, and "Lost Brilliance" closing Section IV, most of them can loosely be termed sonnets. They gesture at rhyme, then pull back off meter and constantly regroup the fourteen lines to dovetail form with theme. Thus comforted and held in place are ambiguities already palpable in the title. *Mother Love*, the German "Mutterliebe," – or should we rather read *Mother and/or Love*? – oscillates between gain and loss, fertility and barrenness, innocence and erotic initiation. The cyclical reiteration between Eros and Thanatos, death and rebirth, opens with a short introductory fable "Heroes," followed by Section II, a series of mother-daughter pieces which drift between myth and autobiography. Section III is the seven part piece "Persephone in Hell," a memory of the poet's, her daughter's, or any teenager's descent into Paris'

erotic “underworld.” There are no sonnets in hell, as a dramatic monologue with a latter-day Hades from the city’s artistic “bohème” reveals. Yet the form still lingers on the margins of the underworld, for two times seven equals fourteen. Dove loves number puzzles as John Greening notes.<sup>2</sup> Section IV prepares the ground for an anxious mother meeting her dizzily damned daughter in “The Bystro Styx.” Sections V and VI concentrate on Demeter’s sense of loss, the inescapable hell of watching a daughter sacrifice her innocence and finally coming to terms with her own narcissistic fixation. Section VII consists of an exquisite cycle of eleven sonnets entitled “Her Island.” The tourist-visit of Rita Dove’s family to Sicily, one of the classical sites of Persephone’s abduction,<sup>3</sup> develops into a true “ars poetica.” Dove equates life and poetry in the symbol of a racetrack surrounding the lake that marks Persephone’s abduction<sup>4</sup> by Hades’ chariot: “To make a sport of death/it must be endless: round and round/till you feel everything you’ve trained for –/precision, speed, endurance – reduced to this/godawful roar, this vale of sound” (ML 76). Of course, the structure of this closing section is circular with sonnets whose first and last lines overlap into one big round around the abyss.

Crucial to our discussion of the interaction between center and margin, is the redefinition of myth in a contemporary setting. In a few signature poems we shall discuss to what extent and to what result *Mother Love* creates a hybrid chthonic empire.

The first poem thwarts the reader’s expectations: not a sonnet, “Heroes” features nine tercets (and one extra line) as if to represent the three protagonists involved: a hero/thief/killer/poet figure, a plucked poppy, a woman losing flower and life. In twenty-eight lines – two times fourteen –<sup>5</sup> innocent details keep snowballing into an inevitably tragic flow: the flower is plucked, the woman’s only joy destroyed. Because she refuses to accept “a juicy spot in the written history” as consolation prize for the loss of her flower, the angry stranger kills her and turns into fate’s victim, mirrored in a

<sup>2</sup> See his review “Vendler’s List,” *Poetry Review* (Summer 1995): 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Graves maintains that “it may have been at Sicilian Enna; or at Attic Colonus; or at Hermione; or somewhere in Crete, or near Pisa, or near Lerna; or beside Arcadian Pheneus, or at Boeotian Nysa, or anywhere else in the widely separated regions which Demeter visited in her wandering search for Core” (*The Greek Myths*, vol. I, 90)

<sup>4</sup> Arcadia, the Greek vale of undisturbed bliss, also features various entrances for Hades. It is Death who says “et in arcadia ego.” Death and bliss are always intertwined.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Cushman observes “that the key to Dove’s sonnets lies not in accentual-syllabic meter or regular rhyming but in their various arrangements based on the number fourteen . . . for Dove counts lines and stanzas and strophic groupings” (“And the Dove Returned,” *Callaloo* 19.1 (1996): 132.

fugitive, explanatory single line in the end:” . . . O why/did you pick/that idiot flower?/Because it was the last one/and you knew//it was going to die.” Only, the poppy would have died had it not been plucked, as Lotta Lofgren (140) points out: “The flower’s near-miraculous task is to form new roots; this is its only chance at sustained life. Disintegration, separation, alienation, all are essential ingredients for growth.” Yet why would *Mother Love* whose central image is plucked narcissi, open with a picked poppy? According to Ovid (*Metamorphoses* V.392) Kore was gathering “violets or white lilies,” symbols of death and resurrection. Poppies however, together with the ears of grain, are constant attributes of Demeter,<sup>6</sup> and the Eleusinian mysteries use drugs in her honor (Burkert 108). The poppies’ soporific and soothing qualities are also associated with the narcotic essence of *narcissi* (Graves 96, 288). Poppy further foreshadows decisive features of the pomegranate whose addictive seeds keep Persephone under Hades’ spell. The flower recalls Hades’ anti-hero Orpheus as well. Rainer Maria Rilke’s sonnet IX to Orpheus reads: “Only he who has eaten/poppies with the dead/will not lose ever again/the gentlest chord.”<sup>7</sup> This is how Rita Dove concatenates various sources and begins to unfold a constant dialogue between the center of “the given” and the margin of “the made.”<sup>8</sup>

The Demeter-Kore/Persephone myth, the absolute myth of womanhood, discloses the dramaturgy of an abduction which pairs rape with enrapture. Sanctioned by Zeus who fathered Persephone, the deed bereaved Demeter in favor of Zeus’ brother Hades, whose queen his daughter was destined to be. As a goddess, daughter of Rhea, Mother Earth, Demeter should know how to conform to the dynastic Olympian law whose stability rests on two imperatives: never abdicate, always procreate. Demeter’s narcissistic grief and neglect of duty which interrupts the regenerative-procreative cycle, affects the welfare of the community and illustrates the conflict between personal and official obligations. In questioning the hierarchy of these duties Demeter may win the sympathy of mortals but doubtless the contempt of immortals: “Grief: The Council” (*ML* 15-16) frames a double demand for

<sup>6</sup> Upon Zeus’ suggestion, Demeter must have taken poppyseeds to forget her pain. Cf. R. Foerster (1874), *Der Raub und die Rückkehr der Persephone* (Stuttgart: Albert Heitz), 62. See also Ovid, *Fasti* IV, 531, where Demeter is said to have broken her fast because she has eaten poppy.

<sup>7</sup> In order to complete an orphic circle, the poet must experience the worlds both of joy and of sorrow. See Rainer Maria Rilke (1993), *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, 1922, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Boston: Shambhala), 19.

<sup>8</sup> A quote from Jorie Graham’s 1987 “Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone” (*The End of Beauty*, 61).

compliance and composure by the Olympians and a chorus of well-meaning neighbors and friends. No single voice in a sonnet but various strands of speech in stanzas of changing size and typography furnish advice.

I told her: enough is enough.  
 Get a hold on yourself, take a lover,  
 help some other unfortunate child.

*to abdicate*  
*to let the garden go to seed*

Yes it's a tragedy, a low-down shame,  
 but you still got your own life to live. Meanwhile,  
 ain't nothing we can do but be discreet  
 and wait

...  
 I say we gotta see her through.

...  
*at last the earth cleared to the sea*  
*at last composure*

Poise and self-control result in a downpour of recreative rain, an oxymoron of abundance in containment. This effective Olympian council is strikingly African American in its speech (double negations, colloquialisms; and references to self-help, maybe a subtle hint that form and composure as sources for creation and recreation might well be of non-white ancestry. In this praisessong for the spirit of black sisterhood, Sister Jeffries could drop in with one of her Mason jars of soul food, "something/sweetish, tomatoes or bell peppers" or "Miz Earl can fetch her later to the movies – /a complicated plot should distract her." Inner-city poise and neighborhood help equal Olympian strategies. What the well-meaning sisters cannot perceive at this point is: there is no escape route from fate. Every detour like the one they suggest, a "car chase through Manhattan,/loud horns melting to a strings-and-sax ending" points but back to the very center of the despair they want Demeter to forget: Hades' pursuit of Persephone.

In the title poem "Mother Love" (ML 17), form and theme interact to expound the ambivalence of love and duty from the archetypal mother Demeter's perspective. The first part depicts a mortal mother's call to duty in casual language.

Who can forget the attitude of mothering?  
 Toss me a baby and without bothering

to blink I'll catch her, sling him on a hip.  
 Any woman knows the remedy for grief  
 is being needed: duty bugles and we'll  
 climb out of exhaustion every time,  
 bare the nipple or tuck in the sheet,  
 heat milk and hum at bedside until  
 they can dress themselves and rise, primed  
 for Love or Glory – those one-way mirrors  
 girls peer into as their fledgling heroes slip  
 through, storming the smoky battlefield.

“Mothering” rhyming with “bothering” is indeed duty’s bugle call until “those one-way mirrors/girls peer into as their fledgling heroes slip/through” appear. Then the primary narcissistic identification of a child with his/her mother is replaced by a teenager’s narcissistic identification with a “fledgling hero.” The image of the mirror and its function as idealizing exaltation brings the poem back to Persephone’s abduction and mirrors a mortal mother’s sense of duty against Demeter’s mythic or, rather grotesque dimension of coping. Hers is a more elaborate speech, garnished with heavenly mockery:

So when this kind woman approached at the urging  
 of her bouquet of daughters,  
 (one for each of the world’s corners,  
 one for each of the winds to scatter!)  
 and offered up her only male child for nursing  
 (a smattering of flesh, noisy and ordinary),  
 I put aside the trousseau of the mourner  
 for the daintier comfort of pity:  
 I decided to save him. Each night  
 I laid him on the smoldering embers,  
 sealing his juices in slowly so he might  
 be cured to perfection. Oh, I know it  
 looked damning: at the hearth a muttering crone  
 bent over a baby sizzling on a spit  
 as neat as a Virginia ham. Poor human –  
 to scream like that, to make me remember.

The goddess presents herself by three anaphoric decisions: “I put aside the trousseau of the mourner . . . /I decided to save him . . . /I laid him on the smoldering embers.” Mother-love leads Demeter to try to preserve her ersatz-child by searing him in immortalizing fire. Thus she wanted to thank Metaneira who had offered her late-born son for her to nurse, as the Greek sources reveal. Despite the best intentions, mother-love may develop

grotesque, even cruel and deadly traits of overprotection. Form reflects theme: We could read the poem as two single sonnets slightly gone awry. The first part, marking Persephone's absence, lacks two lines; the second one, featuring the ersatz-child, exceeds in two. We could as well read the two parts as one epic sonnet of long split lines. The sestet, dedicated to the mortal mother, is lighter, and colloquial in tone. The goddess' octave is statelier, more formal. Yet in tune with the content, division and fragmentation persist in form, either vertically (sestet before octave) or horizontally (split lines).

Section III is the archetypal Persephone's seven part descent into the hell of Paris, "the stone chasms of the City of Lights" (ML 23). Rita Dove renders this journey into life-in-death not only from the perspective of the girl, who is less a naive victim than one curious about life. She also includes other voices: the lyrical self's, the party small talk of American expatriates, a mother's "super-ego": "*are you having a good time/are you having a time at all?*" (ML 27). Except for the final poem, where two parallel columns of fourteen lines each signal a return to poetic shape, hope, and light, this is no sonnet world, but rather, a most prosaic realm, if not a hell of prose.

Visiting "a former schoolmate who'd married/onto the *Ile*" – the Seine is the river Styx – the girl reaches the bottom pit of the underworld. In one of Dove's witty anticlimactic reversals, this is "a two-room attic walk-up/crammed with mahogany heirlooms," an "offensive tin sink" and "gargoyles," props of a stale past world full of artifice and "bad sculpture" like "upright coffins" – containers for dead material – and worse, neither form nor theme for language but small talk centering on "dog shit." "Crudités, peanuts" all over. The poet's message is clear as light in darkness: Death resides wherever artifice and make-believe have replaced art and life, good sculpture, and "meaningful conversation."

The fifth poem of Section III presents a self-revealing interior monologue,<sup>9</sup> in which Hades, a French gallery owner and a stage villain by Dove's standards, exposes his inner racist, rightist, undiscerning self. Absence of artistic enspacement – this is but "an incomprehensible no-act play" – signals an atmosphere of death and decay. Hades' voice, longing for change, is typographically distinguished (ML 30).

I need a *divertissement*:  
 The next one through that gate,  
 woman or boy, will get  
 the full-court press of my ennui.

<sup>9</sup> Introduced and developed to perfection by Robert Browning.

*Merde,*  
 too many at once! Africans,  
 spilling up the escalator  
 like oil from lucky soil—

Distilled in a tercet ushered in by Hades' comment "*Merde*," Rita Dove commemorates the collective abduction of African victims into American slavery, "spilling up the escalator" like human left-overs from the "Middle Passage," "like oil from lucky soil," drifting on the waters of a growing diaspora.

Section IV still plays in Paris. Yet the four poems in sonnet form signal the daughter's increasing composure and willingness to meet with her mother. "*Wiederkehr*," "*Wiring Home*" (ML 38-39), and the meal of Demeter and Persephone in "*The Bistro Styx*" (ML 40-42) counteract the opening of "Hades' Pitch." At this decisive moment in the sequence axes turn, and the poet-daughter becomes the poet-mother or, rather, the true blood artist who notices the mannerisms of her daughter's dark uniform. Her "gray," "graphite" and "brushed steel" are Hades' dark imprints grafted onto her personality, besides the "blues and carmine," half American, half French, he drapes her in private. "Are you content to conduct your life/as a cliché and what's worse, // an anachronism, the brooding artist's demimonde?" the artist-mother asks. How sad for her to see her daughter regress into the state of passive muse, the object of a male gaze, instead of a subject with a voice and style her own. The third sonnet, however, offers consolation in the form of real soul food shared, a "*Chateaubriand*," "smug and absolute/in its fragrant crust, a black plug steaming/like the heart plucked from the chest of a worthy enemy." This is real meat set against the daughter's "posing nude for his appalling canvases, / faintly futuristic landscapes strewn/with carwrecks and bodies being chewed/by rabid cocker spaniels." . . . Hades remains a flat and banal figure. "And he never thinks of food. I wish/I didn't have to plead with him to eat," the daughter complains in the fourth sonnet. In "*The Bystro Styx*," though the primordial fusion with Persephone has been broken, and union with Hades has engendered consciousness and separation, Demeter is at least able to provide nourishment for her starving daughter. By the time they reach dessert, however, she realizes how far they are apart. This is the last of the five strung sonnets:

I stuck with café crème. "This Camembert's  
 so ripe," she joked, "it's practically grown hair,"

mucking a golden globe complete with parsley sprig  
onto a heel of bread. Nothing seemed to fill

her up: She swallowed, sliced into a pear,  
speared each tear-shaped lavalier  
and popped the dripping mess into her pretty mouth.  
Nowhere the bright tufted fields, weighted

vines and sun poured down out of the south.  
“But are you happy?” Fearing, I whispered it  
quickly. “What? You know, Mother”—

she bit into the starry rose of a fig—  
“one really should try the fruit here.”  
*I've lost her*, I thought, and called for the bill.

Instead of having her “cream child” (*GN* 41) back the mother is “stuck with [ersatz] café crème.” After the girl “bit into the starry rose of a fig”<sup>10</sup> full of seeds, Demeter/poet knew her gone for good and graciously asks “for the bill” for this last meal, not the check, this is Paris.

Section V still shows “Demeter Mourning” (*ML* 48) but poised: “I'll not ask for the impossible;/one learns to walk by walking . . . but it will not be happiness,/for I have known that.” Freed from her task of mothering and bothering, as “Nature's Itinerary” (*ML* 46) suggests – “Irene says it's the altitude/that makes my period late;/this time, though, it's eluded/me entirely. I shouldn't worry (I'm medically regulated)” (*ML* 46) – Rita Dove's lyric self explodes and rises above the dichotomy between the inexperienced American and the experienced European, which has enjoyed currency since the time of Henry James and James Baldwin. A third world, Mexico with its open skies, becomes the artistic new ground where the poet is “prepared/for more than metaphorical bloodletting among the glad rags/of the Festival Internacional de Poesia.” The cycle of art and nature, however, is still threatened by temptation, “a beer– /a man's invention to numb us so we/can't tell which way the next wind's blowing.”

Blood plays an important role in rites of passage, be it in the menstrual apparent death of a young girl, in Mark 5.23-42 (*The Holy Bible*), in Apuleius' *Amor and Psyche*, or in Dove's short story *Fifth Sunday*.<sup>11</sup> In all cases “dying” refers to a sexual initiation which sees no end in death but a transformation: the girl dies and becomes a woman. These metamorphoses

<sup>10</sup> The Italian “fica,” “fig,” is a slang term for female genitals.

<sup>11</sup> See Gerburg Treusch-Dieter and Rita Dove's “Fifth Sunday,” 8-9.

and ritual cleansings or stoppings of blood – in Dove's *Mother Love* a halt in “Nature's Itinerary” (46) –, finally make room for a moment of true art. The only sonnet in the cycle that bears the name of the form in its title is “Sonnet in Primary Colors” (47). No longer in sultry Paris but in the high altitude of Mexico<sup>12</sup> poetry is again possible and dedicated to the painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954).

This is for the woman with one black wing  
perched over her eyes: lovely Frida, erect  
among parrots, in the stern petticoats of the peasant,  
who painted herself a present –  
wildflowers entwining the plaster corset  
her spine resides in, that flaming pillar –  
this priestess in the romance of mirrors.

Each night she lay down in pain and rose  
to the celluloid butterflies of her Beloved Dead,  
Lenin and Marx and Stalin arrayed at the footstead.  
And rose to her easel, the hundred dogs panting  
like children along the graveled walks of the garden, Diego's  
love a skull in the circular window  
of the thumbprint searing her immutable brow.

“One black wing” and “parrots” immediately link Frida Kahlo with the birds of Demeter. Yet as a *mater dolorosa*, who suffers in her supporting corset but continues to paint, she conquers her excruciating physical and mental pain by shaping it into art. Thus her creative, though maimed body, symbolizes another third space or common ground where “suffering woman” and “artist” meet and at the same time overcome their barren grief. Frida Kahlo, married twice to the philandering Diego Rivera (1886-1957), who comes and goes like Persephone, masters anger and loss through her brush. The thin air, the stark primary colors, her signature blue, yellow and red, the mental strength of Frida Kahlo maintain a high, clear counterpoint to the decadent underworld of Hades' Paris. Cultural space, not the fixation of a beloved person, is the ultimate homeplace for the displaced and deprived.

Section VI finds Demeter in her second, more sedate cycle of mourning and coping with a fate ancient and modern. With Persephone pregnant in “History,” and “Rusks” (ML 58, 59, 61), Demeter is able to perceive her fate

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<sup>12</sup> Notice that “Mexico” in Robert Lowell's sonnet cycles – he too writes about father, mother, and daughters –, is no place of art but one of erotic initiation and rejuvenation. See *Selected Poems* (New York: The Noonday Press: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 201-206.

as one she shares with others. From Hades ("Demeter's Prayer to Hades," *ML* 63) she seeks but knowledge and understanding. "There are no curses – only mirrors," and mirrors reveal without judging.

*Mother Love* ends with section VII, a cycle of eleven sonnets entitled "Her Island," depicting a tourist visit to Sicily (Persephone's island) by Dove, her German husband and their daughter. Two concentric circles mark the final sequence. As if to unwind the past, the family drives "counterclockwise" (*ML* 73) around Sicily, and then watches a race around the site of Persephone's abduction, the lake of Pergusa in the center of Sicily.<sup>13</sup> The increasingly circular movement is enhanced by eleven forged-link sonnets in which the last line of each poem becomes the first in the next. The section also opens and closes with a slight but significant variation of the same line: "Around us: blazed stones, closed ground" (*ML* 67) and "around us: blazed stones, the ground closed" (*ML* 77). Whereas myth, symbolized in the archeological remnants of a "closed ground" – These monstrous broken sticks, . . . Sicily's most exalted litter (*ML* 74) – first invites to be unearthed, the "ground" may be "closed" after myth's revision and reevaluation. The final sonnet, however, is the poignant realization that "no story's ever finished," including this one.

#### Rooted displacement in form

In *Mother Love* Rita Dove uses and recharges the sovereignty of two significant structures: the theme of myth and the form of the sonnet. Both are particularly suitable carriers for variety within repetition, an interplay of freedom and form. Dove who otherwise resists and rejects limiting demarcations, explicitly welcomes these artistic borders whose inclusions and exclusions she renegotiates at her will. What renders the rewriting of myth so attractive is the absence of a single canonized original. Given the variants, what should be enhanced? In *Mother Love* a mother mourns her daughter, not her sons, and Demeter has sons, according to various sources one to three: Jachos, Plutos and the holy horse Arios. Though including a range of voices and perspectives, Rita Dove chose to enhance the mother's perspective: how to let loose, how to come to terms with loss, grief, humiliation and prostration in the face of imperial Olympian power. Yet, she does so without subordinating Hades' love to the love of mother and daughter timewise. Remember, in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Hades has

<sup>13</sup> In *Der Raub und die Rückkehr der Persephone*, R. Foerster traces the myth from its attic Greek origin to Sicily (65).

Persephone only for a third of the year. A compromise with never healing wounds is reached. Mother and Lover share the young woman equally – “half a happiness is better/than none at goddam all” (*ML* 61) – “death and life continue to take each others’ toll. Two metamorphoses, however, are crucial to the myth’s solution: Demeter’s reconciliation with loss and pain and Hades’ transformation from uncle/rapist to power-sharing and loving consort. The fruit of this resolution is not only the happy family life present in the poet’s visit to Sicily (*ML* VII), but also the mystery revealed at Eleusis: the recognition of identity in difference, the fulfillment of the individual through communion.

### Conclusion

Beyond Rita Dove’s cultural syncretism, issues linked with major features of post-colonial literatures such as the “concern with place and displacement” where a “special post-colonial crisis of identity”<sup>14</sup> comes into being” (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin 8) create a powerful subtext. Her focussing in *Mother Love* on a mother’s and daughter’s personal search for or constitution of identity within cultural dislocation also thematizes the particular interplay between *psychic states* of splitting and breaking away from one’s home and family, notions connected with exile and migration. Ambivalence and vacillation between upper- and underworld, between an innocent America and Paris, the signifier for erotic exploration and experience, mark Kore/Persephone’s and Demeter’s growth and individuation. Mother and daughter also represent yet another generation of empowered African American women. Both choose Paris as a starting point for their respective voyage into selfhood. The trope of a double time (past and present), a double place (origin and exile), and a double multiple person (mother/daughter-mother/poet) emerges as a shared motif in the signature poems we have discussed. It does so precisely in the collusion between the mythical/political and the psychological/personal discourse of dislocation. The two wandering heroines – Demeter who searches worldwide for her lost daughter, and Persephone who waxes and wanes between upper- and underworld – not only represent a perennial dimension of the mother-daughter-consort triangle. They also personify an ethic and aesthetic rendition of the political

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<sup>14</sup> “So what I call the Third World of Theory shares a distinctive focus on identity politics, on the task of retheorizing culture and the labile boundaries of ethnicity,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. maintains in his interview with Charles Rowell, *Callaloo* 14.2 (1991): 444-463; particularly 460.

experience of exile and a self-reflexive discussion of the void that constitutes the essence of love and loss. At this point the mythical dimension of *Mother Love* meets with the postcolonial subtext: Demeter and Persephone's dislocations cannot be contained within the *Heim* of a familial or national culture. In order to be productive and reproductive, their identity and life must constantly shift between borders and realms (earth-Zeus/Olympus for Demeter; earth-Hades for Persephone). Dependent and independent at the same time, they are bound to a compromising *Wiedergang* between life, love and loss, light and darkness, here and there. Death is the prize for transformation and reconfiguration, cultural knowledge of internal and external difference turned into poetry its artistic gratification.

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