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Everyday and Imagined: Empowered Girlhood at Home in the Poetry of Rita Dove

In *Talking Back*, bell hooks makes references to her childhood homeplace¹ and explains how her experiences as a girl at home inspired her writing career. “There, black women spoke in a language so rich, so poetic, that it felt to me like being shut off from life, smothered to death if one were not allowed to participate” (5), she writes. And she continues:

It was in that world of woman speech, loud talk, angry words, women with tongues quick and sharp, tender sweet tongues, touching our world with their words, that I made speech my birthright—and the right to voice, to authorship, a privilege I would not be denied. It was in that world and because of it that I came to dream of writing, to write. (6)

But hooks also notes that speaking when one was not asked to speak was “a courageous act” because “talking back,” when one was a child, and a girl child in particular, invited punishment (5-6). To cope with her need to speak and with the adults’ attempts to suppress her speech and silence her, and in order to maintain her spirit intact, the young hooks had to employ a number of empowering strategies.² She repeatedly ignored the threat of punishment and claimed her right to a voice of her own by insisting on talking, asking questions, raising issues, intervening in conversations. As she invariably suffered punishment for her improper interruptions, she started writing in diaries. It became “a way to capture speech, to hold on to it, keep it close” but it was also a way of “expressing the intensity of [her] sorrow, the anguish of speech—for [she] was always saying the wrong thing, asking the wrong questions” (6). Moreover, the fear of the ridicule and humiliation that followed the exposure of her thoughts, when her diaries were discovered in their provisional hiding places, led her to elaborate on self-protection maneuvers, “choosing [her] hiding places well, learning to destroy work when no safe place could be found” (7). hooks kept dreaming of becoming a writer, when becoming one was no realistic alternative. When she eventually succeeded, it was due to her “talking back,” which she finds to have functioned as

¹ hooks writes about the role of “homeplace” in Black people’s lives in her essay “Homeplace: a Site of Resistance” (*Yearning* 41-49).

² By “empowering strategies” or “strategies of empowerment,” I am alluding to the multiple ways in which Black women (here girls) realize their own strengths and abilities and reaffirm themselves, revise existing definitions of their role and act against patriarchy. The concept of “empowerment” has been defined by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (230). My use of the term “strategy” is inspired by Gayatri Spivak and the attention she draws to the meaning of the word in an interview with Ellen Rooney (in Nicholson 358).

“a rite of initiation, testing [her] courage, strengthening [her] commitment, preparing [her] for the days to come” (9).

While hooks' strategies of empowerment in her parental home were those of powerful resistance (and were thus offensive as much as they were defensive), in the works of African American writers, girls employ empowering strategies that are less discernible, or which cannot be easily defined as resistance strategies. Most interestingly, however, although Black girls might avoid taking overtly defiant positions against victimizing patriarchal attitudes and practices at home, they often manage to maintain a distinct autonomy and moreover, they might even succeed in influencing those around them.

In this essay I examine the ways in which young female poetic personas relate to the domestic milieus of their childhood homeplaces and how they appropriate these in affirming and empowering ways in some poems by Rita Dove. Because Dove has not been as an outspoken feminist as hooks, I find her approach particularly intriguing: of interest in my view is how young and teenage girls are situated in the domestic sphere along with the set of relationships that are developed there, as well as how girls interact and achieve empowerment within domestic contexts that are usually seen as trivial and insignificant. I find the girls' perspectives to be most noteworthy inasmuch as they may set the grounds for or influence adult female perspectives.

In Dove's poetry, although girls do not actively challenge the conditions in the domestic milieus they inhabit, they tend to situate themselves in ways that allow them space to avoid victimization and to equip themselves for adult life. Dreaming and daydreaming, hiding or self-isolation, ignoring their surroundings or developing an interest in the outside, devising excuses, taking their choices seriously, claiming a protagonist's role in the house or opting to depart and return enlightened, are all strategies that serve their purposes.

The domestic setting in Dove's poems is usually characterized by an overriding stability: the girls grow up in safe domestic milieus and experience loving family relationships. The home the poet portrays in her autobiographical poems is an idyllic one where the children can be carefree. In “Grape Sherbet” (*M* 47), although the occasion is a memorial, the poem's tone is rather playful, creating an atmosphere where the children's games around the graves do not appear improper. The most special part of the occasion, the father's sherbet, is a “masterpiece” made according to his “secret” recipe and tasting “just how we imagined lavender / would taste.” To the children “Each dollop / of sherbet, later, / is a miracle,” they all enthusiastically agree “it's wonderful!” and come to think “no one was lying / there under our feet, / we thought it / was a joke.” This dessert is for them the materialization of the celebration of life. Moreover, being nostalgically remembered, it stands for a celebration of the happy times of childhood.

This stability allows more relaxed attitudes within the domestic sphere which may inspire creative commitment on the part of the children. As Dove states in *The Poet's World*, the environment of her parental home was inspiring and provided the children—boys and girls alike—with intellectual challenges. This is exemplified by a family ritual according to which everybody had to narrate something about their day at the dinner table, a practice that as an adult she came to recognize as “learning how to shape life—or, more precisely, memory” (59). But home is also a place “where the everyday rules of how to live and how to act were established” (hooks, *Talking Back* 5) and where values are conveyed from parents to children. In Dove’s own words, she “grew up protected, in a loving supportive but also stern environment” (Walsh 145). Her rather complex poem “In the Old Neighborhood” (*SP* xxii-xxvi) is a return to her parents’ house as an adult, and a journey through the memories that arise during the visit, back to her childhood. The young Dove was taught to read the newspaper properly and in a structured manner “headlines first, / lead story . . . / followed by editorials and / local coverage,” and was exposed to the stimulating influence of books.³ Notably, the approach to literature was a part of everyday life. In the poem, the books in the bookshelf are identified in association with the foods she ate while reading them as a child. Food (sardines, stuffed green olives, Candy buttons, Bazooka bubble gum, Fig Newtons, bitter lemon) and literature exist alongside in Dove’s childhood home. Moreover, the relation of the two is regulated by commonplace parental interference with demands on discipline.

But Macbeth demanded dry bread,
crumbs brushed from a lap
as I staggered off the cushions
contrite, having read far past
my mother's calling. (*SP* xxiii)

The encouragement of the children to pursue their interests obviously takes place within the parameters of an ordinary domesticated childhood. They learn how to find in the newspaper information about an exciting world “*Santiago, / Paris, Dakar*—names as / unreal as the future,” but also how to use the paper to deal with more basic needs, like carry out the garbage: “I wrap bones and eggshells / into old newspaper for burning, / folding the corners in / properly” (*SP* xxvi).

In the shelter and vitality of the childhood home, the empowering strategies employed by young girls are initially not gender specific; much like the boys, or together with the boys, they explore the house and its yard for spaces where they can be alone, or with each other, away from adult control. Hiding is an interesting strategy in an African American historical perspective, as it has often been both

³ Dove has had a typically middle class childhood: “She studied cello extensively . . . was exposed to literature and reading in a home filled with books, and became fluent in German” (Pereira 184).

imperative and empowering. During slavery, and even after emancipation, concealment was perhaps the only way to achieve freedom. For slaves on the run, hiding until they reached safety was essential. In addition, not disclosing their thoughts and feelings was not only preferable but necessary if they were to maintain their integrity, and was commonly practiced in their confrontation with their oppressors to avoid overexposing themselves and risk harassment.

In Dove's "Adolescence—I" (YH 48), hiding provides the appropriate conditions for the development of empowering alliances—the empowering effect of hiding can be traced in the excitement of the girls who meet in secluded corners for privacy. Collective withdrawal inspires the sharing of important secrets among a group of hiding girls, allowing them to derive strength from private communications: "In water-heavy nights behind grandmother's porch / We knelt in the tickling grasses and whispered." Linda, the girl who possesses knowledge about intimacy, with her face grown "wise," informs the rest that "A boy's lips are soft, / As soft as a baby's skin," a piece of information that causes a wave of excitement. Much as they may leave her surprised and confused at first, the whispered words make a great impact on the previously ignorant girl:

The air closed over her words.
A firefly whirred near my ear, and in the distance
I could hear streetlamps ping
Into miniature suns
Against a feather sky. (SP 42)

This kind of active sharing of experience is vital and potentially liberating. With their commitment to enlightening each other the girls trigger a growth of their awareness, which might further contribute to and facilitate their disclaiming future roles of passivity.⁴ The notion of enlightenment is suggested here figuratively; the sound of the words echoes into the sound of different sources of light. The gradual move from ignorance to knowledge is audiovisual. First, there is the pale light of a buzzing firefly, then come the streetlamps, which in turn explode into suns.

While the childhood home obviously provided spaces where the girls could determine what was taking place around them and could feel empowered, there are instances where in addition to physical hiding young girls also engage in "imaginative flights."⁵ Yet, in "Fantasy and Science Fiction" (GN 15) and "Geometry" (YH 17), the image of the house dominates even the girls' fantasies.

⁴ In "Poem in Which I Refuse Contemplation" (GN 19-20) the girl is again in the crawl space, but this time alone with a boy. Still, the appropriation of this kind of alliances and communications might similarly be employed by boys.

⁵ I have borrowed this term from Georgoudaki's comment on Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry: "moments of solitude, privacy, imaginative flights, and inner freedom from adult restrictions are important for Brooks's girls" (*Race, Gender and Class Perspectives*, 119). "Flight" and "escape" are words loaded with meanings in African-American contexts.

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In “Fantasy and Science Fiction,” the means to escape from everyday life become the pages of books and magazines. These imagined escapes are portrayed as concrete departures. Especially intriguing is the attempted exit from the paternal house in the first stanza of the poem, as even the imagined destination is a house, the mirror image of the girl’s parents’ house. The girl, looking out of the front door, sees the building’s identical image but is aware that this new house is different:

I knew if I crossed the street and entered,
taking living room, stairwell and landing
in reverse, I'd end up on my knees
in a house my parents never owned nor dreamed of owning (GN 15)

This is indeed *her* house, a place where she is in power, since it is the creation of her imagination. Her existence in its mirror-image space is not only different from her existence as defined in her parents’ house, but also changed far beyond their expectations. Dove allows the reader a glimpse of how empowering such an imaginary exit can be in the third stanza:

Sometimes, shutting a book and rising,
you can walk off the back porch
and into the sea—though
it's not the sort of story you tell your mother. (GN 16)

The girl then is all-powerful when she is daydreaming. She can imagine going to places and attempt doing things that would worry her mother. Still, out of a wide range of possible destinations her imagination first takes her just across the street and into another house. Besides, the hesitation expressed in the conditional “if I crossed the street” implies that her departure at this stage is in fact uncertain. Perhaps her thought/dream is only the exploration of the possibility to leave, a hypothetical exit. In any case, the girl’s imaginary escapes are heavily influenced, if not inspired, by the physical presence of houses.

However, in the fantasy described in “Geometry,” much as it interferes with her imagination, the young girl manages to master the image of the house. While she physically remains in one of its rooms, doing her homework, the power of her imagination causes the house to open up, its walls to grow transparent so that the girl is able to “catch a glimpse of the possibilities of the Open” (PW 21):

I prove a theorem and the house expands:
the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling,
the ceiling floats away with a sigh.

As the walls clear themselves of everything
but transparency, the scent of carnations

leaves with them. I am out in the open

And above the windows have hinged into butterflies,
sunlight glinting where they've intersected.
They are going to some point true and unproven. (*YH 21*)

Here, the imagery creates a liberating atmosphere. But the house is by no means rejected; its structure expands into something new and it is its windows/butterflies that reach towards this world of possibilities that suddenly lies ahead. Because the "open" appears simultaneously as familiar ground, the girl can comfortably consider its exploration. Evidently, the domination of the house in the imaginative flights of young girls does not necessarily signify passivity.

But as girls reach puberty and start to contemplate their future, their imaginative flights are often conditioned, if not shaped, by the domestic reality they recognize in adult women's lives. In "Hully Gully" (*GN 14*) and "Adolescence—III" (*YH 50*), girls anticipate their life in ways which tend to reaffirm rather than interrogate traditional gender roles.

In envisioning their future life, the teenage girls in "Hully Gully" seem not to worry about what is to come. Their thoughts and/or behavior arguably apply to a kind of protective strategy, an attempted denial to consider the implications their parents' life might have on their own future, by means of distancing themselves from such concerns. These girls are preoccupied with themselves, interested in little more than their appearance, popular music and having a good time, and remain outside the gloomy adult reality: "as they leaned their elbows / into the shells of lemons, / they were humming, they were humming." Their world, before they are caught in the snares of married life in the 50s or perhaps early 60s, is dreamy. They spend their days at home, in self-imposed isolation from their surroundings, "Locked in bathrooms for hours, / daydreaming in kitchens" and waiting for the evenings to get dressed up, step out and enjoy themselves. Along with their imaginary escapes their departures from the house are also physical, first through the porch, where "porch geraniums / rocked the grandmothers to sleep" and then "down / the swollen pitch of avenue." Yet, in the poem's last stanza their carefree existence is set against the less glorious life of their parents:

daughters floating above the ranks of bobby socks.
Theirs was a field to lie down in
While fathers worked swing shift and
Wives straightened oval photographs
Above the exhausted chenille
In bedrooms upstairs everywhere. . . . (*GN 14*)

The "everywhere" here renders the domesticated life of the wives so prevailing that the implication of an inevitable return of the girls to the house and through

marriage to a fate similar to that of their mothers does not strike us as improbable. Their casual departure from home, a granted privilege of youth in their case, is quite likely to be temporary.

“Adolescence—III” (*YH 50*), a poem similar to “Hully Gully” but written from the first person perspective, gives further record of the life and the expectations of adolescent girls. In the first stanza, the girl, who is in the garden with her mother (“With Dad gone, Mom and I worked / The dusky rows of tomatoes”), recognizes in the ripeness of the tomatoes her own growing maturity. She knows that the innocence of her prim undergarment is slowly being outgrown: “I too / grew orange and softer, swelling out / Starched cotton slips.” And while working in the garden she starts daydreaming; the color of the sky wakes associations with cloth, then dresses, which bring her back in her room:

in my room
I wrapped scarred knees in dresses
That once went to big band dances;
I baptized my earlobes with rosewater.
Along the window-sill, the lipstick stubs
Glittered in their steel shells. (*MH 50*)

Old dresses trigger the girl’s imagination about her mother’s or even grandmother’s youth and now that her body is physically ripe she starts to prepare herself for a similar course. She still has scarred knees but tries to hide them. The rosewater and the tidy arranged lipsticks (which in their “steel shells” invoke associations with ammunition casings), testify that she longs for what is about to come.

Looking out of the rows of clay
And chicken manure, I dreamed how it would happen:
He would meet me by the blue spruce,
A carnation over his heart, saying,
“I have come for you, Madam;
I have loved you in my dreams.”
At his touch, the scabs would fall away. (*MH 50*)

When the teenage girl claims her right to dreams all is magic. The imagined lover has the power to beautify her world and the girl herself. At the same time her aspirations are also disturbingly clear and concrete; all the preparations, whether physical or mental, seek their fulfillment in romance.

Still, the girls are usually very aware of the power their position at home entitles them and do not hesitate to make use of this power in relation to the young men they meet. Thus in “A Suite for Augustus: Planning the Perfect Evening” (*YH 27*) the young female persona capriciously lets her cavalier for the evening wait,

which enhances the effect of her eventual appearance: “I keep him waiting, tuck in the curtains, / buff my nails (such small pink eggshells). / As if for the last time, I descent the stair.” It is obvious that coquetry here is both conscious and purposeful. Her spending deliberately extra time on her nails is equivalent to the girl’s preparation to impose her authority over the (already nervous) boy waiting for her downstairs: “He stands penguin-stiff in a room so quiet we forget it is there.” The posture of the young man in the quiet room is not relaxed, partly because of the clothes he is wearing but also because he is on less familiar ground than she is. Thus, according to her plans, the beginning of the “perfect evening” finds the girl in an advantageous position, which may set the parameters for a more confident attitude on her part during the rest of the date: “Ah, / Augustus, where did you learn to samba? / And what is that lump below your cummerbund?”

Similarly, in “Courtship” (*TB* 16-17), the courting Thomas lingers around young Beulah’s house, all the while feeling uncomfortable and out of place. When his presence in the neighborhood (“up and down the block / waiting—for what?”) does not produce the desired results because Beulah “won’t set a foot / in his turtledove Nash, / it wasn’t proper,” the youth has to step into her house and propose to her:

Then the parlor festooned
like a ship and Thomas
twirling his hat in his hands
wondering how did I get here.
China pugs guarding a fringed settee
where a father, half-Cherokee,
smokes and frowns.
I’ll give her a good life—
what was he doing,
selling all for a song? (*TB* 17)

Her appearance in the poem is faceless (“Her pleated skirt fans / softly, a circlet of arrows”) yet Beulah is definitely not passive and Thomas, met by her “arrows,” feels compelled to claim her, giving his guarantees to her frowning father. And though the discussion here takes place in a traditional manner, between men, the daughter is the actual director of the scene. The house is embellished to welcome the prospective fiancée, while the father is seated king-like in the parlor to infuse respect. The effect on Thomas is bewilderment. He associates the house with a ship, giving expression to his feelings of uncertainty and perhaps even fear. The shifts from reported to direct speech in the account of his thoughts and his spoken words dramatize his state of mind.

In her short story “Second-Hand Man,” which is, I believe, a prose version of this poem,⁶ Dove illustrates clearly the young girl’s strategies in her effort to impose her will, as she step by step allows her lover to proceed (his movement being schematically from the street and into her house):

She knew he was the man. She’d know it a long while but she was just biding her time. He called on her the next day. She said she was busy with canning peaches. He came back the day after. They sat on the porch and watched the people go by. He didn’t talk much, except to say her name like that: ‘Vir-gin-ee-a,’ he said ‘you’re a mighty fine woman.’ She sent him home a little after that. He showed up again a week later. She was angry and told him she didn’t have time for playing around. But he’d brought his twelve-string guitar, and he’d been practicing all week just to play a couple of songs for her. She let him in then and made him sit on the stool while she sat on the porch swing. (*FS* 25)

The girl does not change her ways even after she realizes she is in love:

She didn’t let him know it though, not for a long while. ... No, he courted her proper. Every day for a little while. They’d sit on the porch until it got too cold and then they’d sit in the parlor with two or three bright lamps on. Her mother and father were glad Virginia’d found a beau, but they weren’t taking any chances. Everything had to be proper. He got down, all trembly, on one knee and asked her to be his wife. She said yes. There’s a point when all this dignity and stuff get in the way of Destiny. He kept on trembling; he didn’t believe her. ‘What?’ he said. ‘I said yes,’ Virginia answered. She was starting to get angry. Then he saw she meant it, and went into the other room to ask her father for her hand in marriage. (*FS* 26-27)

Although the young man apparently has the freedom to flirt with and visit any girl, once he falls for the particular girl’s attraction, both in the poem and in the short story, his presence around her house is authorized and follows the conditions set by the girl and her parents. The house is for her a sturdy base where she can confidently operate, and provides space where she can assert herself.⁷ In contrast, the domestic setting constitutes unfamiliar, unsteady ground for him.

Poetic personas like Beulah do not ever have the chance to leave the house and simply move, upon marriage, from the homeplace of their parents to a homeplace of their own. Consequently they appropriate for their empowerment the only space that is available to them. There are, however, poems by Dove where the

⁶ Here and in “Courtship, Diligence” (*TB* 50) Dove gives Virginia’s/Beulah’s perspective. For an insightful analysis of “Courtship” and “Courtship, Diligence” see Lisa Steinman 434-435.

⁷ Six months after their wedding, Virginia, having found out about her new husband’s past, keeps him at gunpoint for three days and three nights, waiting for him to sleep so that she can shoot him (*FS* 25).

girls take the opportunity to actually leave home, only to return there again later. As Doris Betts comments in the introduction of *Southern Women Writers*, “[w]hile place and the homeplace are still strong, each year female characters and their creators want, not rooms of their own, but even larger spaces” (Inge 5). Girls undertake strategic departures and are empowered through the enlargement of their perspectives in their contact with the greater world.

However, the girls’ departures are especially intriguing when seen in relation to their returning back home; the appreciation of the domestic sphere weighs heavily when shown by young women who have experienced the outside. Furthermore, the importance they attach to homeplaces may in turn validate the lives of domesticated girls and women: “*whole again whole again now*” exclaims Dove, leaning at the sink and listening to her mother chatter in her parents’ kitchen (“In the Old Neighborhood,” *SP* xxiv).⁸

In the poems “Augustus Observes the Sunset,” “Wake” and “Back,” from the six-poem sequence “A Suite for Augustus” (*YH* 25-30), and in “Backyard, 6 A.M.” (*GN* 43), the house is a place of departures as well as a place that—whatever grief it holds—is safe to return to.⁹ In “Augustus Observes the Sunset” the setting is reminiscent of the domestic setting in “Adolescence III.” But the atmosphere is far more loaded here, the poetic voice is intense, the tone eruptive. In the bizarre blending of images of natural elements (the sun, the air, the sky) and different kinds of food, words like “conspiracy,” “burns,” and “silence” imply unrest, while “spreading,” “swelling” and “growing” indicate expansion.

July. The conspiracy of colors—
Ketchup, marshmallows, the tub of ice,
Bacon strips floating in pale soup.
The sun, like a dragon spreading its tail,
Burns the blue air to ribbons.

Eastward, the corn swelling in its sockets,
A wall of silence, growing. (*YH* 28)

As the cadence of sharp exchanges in the interplay between the above images is interrupted by the self-addressing question “What are you doing in your own backyard / Holding your coat in your arms?” it is clear that an immediate departure is at stake. This departure, which is negotiated through a contrast of what is well known against the unknown and threatening (food from the kitchen

⁸ For Dove’s views on the role of the kitchen see *The Poet’s World* 27 and 31-32.

⁹ Another poem about return to the parental home is “A Father Out Walking on the Lawn” (see *PW* 57-58). Also relevant is the first part of “The Other Side of the House” (*GN* 37), but this poem along with “Backyard, 6 A.M.,” as Dove explains, examines “the perimeters of new motherhood” (*PW* 28). These poems show the departure/return theme to be a point of transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood.

and the garden against the state of the weather), and takes place through the backyard, is not an ultimate exit. However decisive the line “There is so much to do!—You pack” is, it is not the poem’s final one. Instead, the last two lines are similar to those in the beginning of the poem and the tension between “spareribs and snow-puffed potatoes” and “The sky shakes like a flag” remains unresolved. As home is projected through its nurturing function the departure from it is hardly an escape; similarly to the exit in “The Other Side of the House” (*GN* 37) it is rather a move of expansion: “I walk out the kitchen door / trailing extension cords into the open / gaze of the southwest” (see *PW* 28).

In any case, for Dove’s young female poetic personas departure from home in pursuit of experience does not entail the rejection of home and its importance. While in “Wake” the girl takes the direction “eastward, following rivers,” in “Back,” which reflects Dove’s experience as a young student in Germany (*Kitchen* 233), the young woman is “scholarshipped / to Europe and back” and can face the circumstances at home from a new perspective. And in the autobiographical “Backyard, 6 A.M.,” Dove as an adult woman now, expresses her appreciation for her return on “space stapled down with every step. . . .” considering the safety of solid domestic ground a reward: “I swore to be good and the plane didn’t / fall out of the sky.” The poet sees the backyard ground metaphorically as “the floor of the world” and expresses awareness that existence there cannot be dismissed as simple or uncomplicated. She recognizes the complexity of domestic experience in that domestic space holds gratification, but also conflict and grief. At home, while dealing with “jet lag and laundry,” the poet finds herself paying attention to tiny, seemingly unimportant details, examining the insignificant rhythms of the slightest moves of the insects in the garden and being open to their meanings. Dove values this experience enough to write about.

Finally, I want to suggest that the strategies young girls and adolescents use to cope with the less rewarding parts of their existence also empower them towards adulthood. Of course in many of the poems, domestic existence is represented by an overflow of idyllic images that may seem romantically naive. Moreover, there is usually a discrepancy between the life girls dream about or imagine and that which in their majority they are to experience. It is also true that the strategies they employ can be followed only temporarily and that their effects are not particularly long-lasting. But the above do not necessarily prove these strategies self-defeating or ineffective. In my view, the idealized representations of domestic existence emphasize the importance of domestic experience as well as the need for well functioning homeplaces. Imagined idyllic existence at home is less likely to constrain young girls or narrow their perspectives and may instead enhance their possibilities for achievement. Once they learn to claim their part in what is most familiar to them, they can assert themselves and claim a role even in the unfamiliar. Dove has herself moved beyond her initial expectations, as expressed in her autobiographical poems, and into a celebrated career; still she does not

disclaim the importance of domestic space/existence. Besides, the temporary effects of their strategies enable constant experimentation, which might sharpen the girls' awareness and result in a plethora of different approaches of their personal situation, according to the circumstances. The escape through isolation or daydreaming, for example, and the reliance on romance can be useful only as long as they are short lived.

In conclusion, in Dove's poems, the female poetic personas experience their girlhood in peaceful and nurturing domestic milieus, where they have opportunities to develop their strengths. At an early age, girls hide in their games, form alliances, read, learn and even join the boys. But as they grow and anticipate their future they start to navigate towards empowering positions either by learning how to explore the possibilities they have, or by devising the alternatives they need.

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