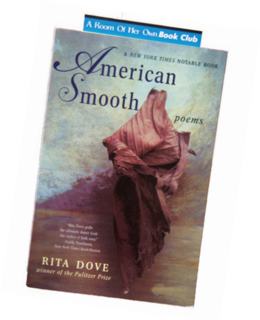
## Rita Dove's *American Smooth*


A Room Of Her Own Book Club
A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK
American Smooth
poems
RITA DOVE
winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Rita Dove, former Poet Laureate of the United States, is the recipient of many honors, among them the Pulitzer Prize, the National Humanities Medal, and the Heinz Award. In 2006 she received the coveted Common Wealth Award of Distinguished Service, and in 2008 she was honored with the Library of Virginia's Lifetime Achievement Award. Among her recent publications are the poetry collection *On the Bus with Rosa Parks,* and the drama *The Darker Face of the Earth*, with her latest poetry collection, *Sonata Mulattica,* scheduled for publication by W.W. Norton in the spring of 2009. A 1970 Presidential Scholar, she received her B.A. summa cum laude from Miami University of Ohio, and her M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. She also held a Fulbright scholarship at the Universität Tübingen in Germany. Rita Dove is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where she lives with her husband, the writer Fred Viebahn.

### A Conversation with Rita Dove

**Excerpted from an Interview with Camille Dungy in *Callaloo*, Fall 2005.**

*Camille T. Dungy, the author of What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison, was a finalist for the PEN Center USA 2007 Literary Award, and the Library of Virginia 2007 Literary Award. Dungy has received numerous fellowships from organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts, Cave Canem, and Bread Loaf, and is Associate Professor in the Creative Writing Department at San Francisco State University. Editor of Black Nature: A Poetry Anthology, she is co-editor of From the Fishouse: An Anthology of Poems that Sing, Rhyme, Resound, Syncopate, Alliterate, and Just Plain Sound Great, and assistant editor of Gathering Ground: A Reader Celebrating Cave Canem's First Decade. Her second poetry collection is due from Red Hen Press in 2010. Her poems have been published widely in anthologies, and print and online journals.*

**Camille Dungy:** First off, let's talk about your latest book, *American Smooth*. This book literally came out of the fire, in some ways.

**Rita Dove:** In a sense, yes, it was the phoenix that rose from the ashes. We had a fire in 1998: Lightning struck our house. Beyond the fact that it's the kind of tragedy you work your way out of, it also split the creative work. I identify my poems now as "before the fire" and "after the fire." I was about halfway through a book when the fire intervened; the manuscript took a different path, and the path that it took turned out to be *American Smooth*.

Because of the fire, my husband and I began ballroom dancing. After about a week of recovery, our neighbors came up to us and said, "It's time to get out of the ashes. We've bought tickets for a dinner dance this weekend, so Rita, buy a dress; Fred, get a tuxedo. Let's have fun." We went; and when we saw people dancing—really dancing, like in swooping across the floor—I said, "Oh, I've always wanted to do that." You know, there's a feeling of incredible freedom after such a big whammy, and you think, "I'm alive, and that's what matters; now I can do anything I want." The little things fall away. We simply said, "We're just going to dance and see what happens." So we did, and we ‘re still doing it.

The title refers a type of ballroom dancing—American Smooth is the jazzier, American version of fox trots, tangos, and waltzes. When I first encountered the term it seemed representative of so much that is quintessentially American. By "quintessentially American" I mean more African-American, the way we kind of riff on things and make them our own. And that became the overlying metaphor for the entire book, the idea of taking whatever you're handed—whether it's history's ironies or a dance style—and making it your own.

**CTD:** You speak several different languages. You speak English, you speak German, you have an ability to pick up the nuances and intonations of the languages. You're also a musician, you play the viola de gamba and the cello. Now you speak the language of dance, which has its own technical terms and its own physical language. How has the language of dance influenced your poetry? Do you see it differently influencing your poetry than the music or the German has?

**RD:** Well, in some ways all of us have different languages that we move by, that we think by. It may be too soon for me to be able to answer that question as well as I'd like. I can say that dance has brought more physicality into my life—when you dance, you have to get up and move—but I also think it adds more body to the poems; they want to get up off the page and strut around. There's an energy in the new poems that's different from the energy that happened before.

I've always been intensely musical, and my poems have often reflected that musical impulse. First of all, let me say it straight out: I believe that if a poem doesn't sing, it has no business being a poem. Granted, each poem must have its own music, but it should sing that music without any kind of shame. During the course of my writing life I've heard and played many different musics—blues and jazz, call-and-response, symphonic and ensemble—and I think now my poems are actually getting up and walking around.

**CTD:** You've talked about poetry being a cage whose walls you were working against with the sonnets in *Mother Love*. Are you feeling with these new poems that there is a difference—that it's not the restriction of a cage?

**RD:** It's a different cage, but that's all right. Musicians can tell you they have cages within cages—there are measures, formatas, and rests; there are key signatures, time signatures. And no matter what kind of dance you do, you have to dance to the music. In those poems in the book about specific dances, I do try to knit the cadence of the poem to the rhythm of the dance. “Fox Trot Fridays,” for instance, emulates the easygoing, lilting stroll of a Nat King Cole song. A Latin dance called the Bolero consists of a long, sweeping, sensuous movement, followed by a tight little grind, as if you were screwing your hips into the ground; the poem “Bolero” combines a very long line with two short lines, so that you have to snap back to the left margin. The poems exist within different formal cages which suggest the basic “mood” of the dance. Maybe “cage” sounds too pejorative; I don’t mean it to. It’s simply the tennis net you play across, the thing you get around; it’s the basketball hoop, what you want to go “ swoosh” when you aim and let go. It’s more a challenge than something restrictive.

**CTD:** You talk about the different ways that you use this term American Smooth and what that implies in terms of being American and operating in this world. One of the things that is a central part of the book are the soldiers in WWI. Could you talk about how you became interested in these soldiers? In particular in the journal that you use with the poem “Passages”?

**RD:** Oh, that’s a long story! Those poems started over 20 years ago with a beautiful photo I had seen, I can’t remember where—of one of the black army regiments from WWI: Lt. James Europe’s military jazz band marching up 5th Avenue in perfect formation, for the Victory Parade in 1919. These proud black soldiers who had brought jazz to Europe—what was it like to play while the fighting raged around them, how did they come to enter the war? The more I read, the more fascinated I became. I discovered they had enlisted as Americans but had entered the war under French command because the leaders of the segregated U.S. forces could not envision black soldiers fighting side-by-side with white soldiers. Just one more of those absurd situations produced by this country’s racial trauma. What incredible irony—here they were, fighting in the war that was supposed to make the world “safe for democracy,” yet coming from a country that clearly had not been honoring the spirit of democracy and would not live up to its promise of democracy upon their return. The more I read, the more amazed I was. So little was known about these men! They distinguished themselves in combat; they received more medals and citation of honor—not from this country but from the French, the Croix de Guerre—than you can shake a stick at; even though they didn’t have adequate training beforehand, they went overseas and were the first Allied units to reach the Rhine in their push east. Lt. James Europe’s band played jazz all over France; ironically, they became good will ambassadors for the very country that had reviled them.

I began thinking about how I wanted to present these remarkable soldiers. Ideally as individuals—let each man speak his piece, bear witness in his own particular way. The poem you referred to, “Passages,” emerged from a marvelous bit of serendipity. . . it was a gift, actually, in the purest and least metaphorical sense of that word. In 1987, when I received the Pulitzer Prize, I was living in Tempe, Arizona; when interviewers asked what I was working on, I mentioned the World War I soldier poems. Shortly thereafter I was contacted by an elderly black gentleman, already in his late eighties then, who had retired from Ohio to Tucson. “You know,” he said, “I kept a diary during my tour of duty; I’d be happy to talk to you.” So my husband Fred and I drove down to Tucson and spent a wonderful afternoon with him and his wife. As we were preparing to leave, he gave me his diary and said, “I’m not going to use it any more. I remember it all; I don’t need a diary.” What a treasure! “Passages” details his travel by ship across the Atlantic to enter the war, not knowing what lay in store for him and his comrades. In my poetic distillation, I tried to be true to his words—the innocence, the hope that was also a kind of stoicism—“Okay, I’m not going to be afraid, I’m a soldier, I know what’s expected of me”—indeed, the honor with which he entered battle.

**CTD:** I see in your work several different approaches to history. There’s history from an official sense—this is the story that happened, let me re-investigate the story. There’s the personal history, just as you’re talking about with “Passages.” And there’s the speculative history, as you’re talking about with the James Europe poems—these are stories we have, images you have, about James Europe, Hattie McDaniel. You re-imagine what might have been the story of that story, or the story behind the story. I remember in the poems in *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* you look at figures of other people on the bus, people you don’t often hear about, as well as Rosa Parks. What do you think about that intersection between those different kinds of history? Do you consciously work with those? Do you just find yourself working with them?

**RD:** Probably both. I consciously work at exploring it because I find those junctures—where History with a capital H intersects with lower case history—fascinating. But I also find that the topics creep up on me. I believe each of us experiences history on all these levels. There’s the talk on the street; there’s the front we put up in order to hide our true feeling—which is another level of personal history that’s already a revision. Then there’s History, the official version, whatever gets written down and lasts. As a black woman, from a very early age I was acutely aware of the discrepancies between history as I experienced it and History as it was reported. In the words of W.E.B. DuBois, such a marginalized position gives you binocular vision, because when you’re not in the mainstream you must still understand and be able to “go with the flow” if asked, and yet you have knowledge from another vantage point as well. So these interstices are fascinating; they are the nodes where we can be most aware of the ways in which we negotiate life, from the innermost feelings to the outward presentation. My poetry often emanates from that crossroads; I love the view it gives me.

**CTD:** In many of your poems, there's this potential for violence, a barely masked sense of destruction or potential for destruction. You even speak about it in the epigraph to one section of *American Smooth*. There you say, "Our hearts are forged out of barbarism and violence" and that "we learned to control it, but it is still part of us." Can you talk about the way that tension between the potential for violence and the decision not to act in violence is coming through in your poems? I'm thinking particularly about "Meditation at 50 Yards, Moving Target."

**RD:** The idea of mastering the potential for violence is certainly the spirit in which I was raised. The nonviolent tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Know your enemies but never let them see you sweat. If you react to their taunts, if you explode in violence, then they've won. What you have to do is get better than they are. And then there was Malcolm X on the other end, scaring the white folks silly. There are positive aspects as well as dangers to either approach. But adhering to the principle of nonviolence was how I was raised. Being naturally shy, it was a path I walked fairly easily.

I believe that my poems work best when violence simmers just under the surface. It's more frightening, more threatening, to feel it is right beneath this polite, contained exterior, ready to burst. Take the poem "Meditation at 50 Yards, Moving Target." It's a poem about guns and the eerie pleasure of target shooting, the power and the danger. Since gun control is a very bristly topic in this country—everyone has an opinion—our defenses go up immediately. I wanted to circumvent all that by backing into the issue.

The personal story behind all this begins with the house fire, too. My husband and I took up target practice when a neighbor approached us after the fire and offered to teach us how to shoot. He said we should at least know something about self-defense. He was a retired high-ranking Army officer. He started out from the standpoint of safety—here's what you have to do to keep from shooting off your own toe, this is what you need to know in order not to hurt anyone. I didn't want anything to do with the whole thing—forget it, I don't want to hold the gun, this is horrible. But as I began firing, I felt something very interesting happening—an immense, unsettling pleasure, a strange sense of power and possibility. Now, I could have sat at my desk and denied those feelings, said no, this is wrong. But that doesn't mean the sensation doesn't exist, nonetheless. I think it's important to acknowledge these kinds of feelings if we're going to understand anything at all about controlling them.

Also, it really gives you a strong sensation of success to be able to hit a target. I'm not talking about just guns, I'm talking about all the kinds of targets one aims for.

So I wanted to get at that sense of exaltation—the beauty of a gun with a name like Glock, or Keltec.

And then, right in the middle of all that beauty, to remember that this thing can kill. It can go through walls. To comprehend that kind of power unleashed, not only the beauty but the danger—not only the danger but the beauty. At the end of the poem, I have the bullet speak, which is a strange thing to do. There's something unimaginable about a bullet, how fast and single-minded it is, how completely without right or wrong. I enjoyed inhabiting the bullet's consciousness, though it scared me to death. But I gradually understood that the challenge was, in essence, the point: A bullet moves so fast, faster than thought—it's pure body, yet it takes the body with it as it burrows through. To render that kind of violence in a restrained manner is to my mind more penetrating (pun intended) than an outburst of protest. Because vehement protest only convinces those who already believe. You're preaching to the choir. It's better to sneak in and get to someone before they know they've been persuaded.

**CTD:** That poem like many others is in several parts. Why do you think you find yourself working from several angles?

**RD:** It's true, isn't it? The other night while giving a reading, I noticed how many of my poems are in, say, 4 parts. Again, it comes from the idea of getting beneath the official History. There are many sides to the truth, so many facets, and I like exploring a situation from different angles. In the case of Thomas and Beulah, we get both sides of a marriage—the husband's, then the wife's. In "Meditation at 50 Yards, Moving Target," the focal point won't stay still and we circle it as well—let's look at safety, let's consider men versus women, who's the better shot, let's take the bullet's perspective, let's analyze the act of squeezing the trigger, how controlled an action that is, if you really want to hit your mark.

Exploring a topic from different angles enables me to get—if not a 360-degree view, at least a 3-dimensional picture. The reader is given the chance to contemplate the disturbing elements in tranquility, because he or she can pause to take a breath, then plunge in and look at it again.

**CTD:** So do you sit down and say, "I'm going to write a poem in 4 parts"? Or do you write one part, then say this isn't finished, and figure out a new angle to finish?

**RD:** I never sit down to write a poem in 4 parts. On the other hand, it's rare that I'm writing and think it's finished when it's not. At some point I may realize there's going to be more than one part, and though I might not be able to tell right off the bat how many, I would know before the penultimate section was finished!

I knew that "Meditation at 50 Yards" would have at least 2 parts. "Safety First" talks about how a gun should be handled. And I knew there would have to be something about male/female differences, which became the 3rd section, called "Gender Politics." I learned that women tend to be better shots than men because our heartbeat is slower; we actually shake less. But writing that section led to the 4th part about the bullet. Now, the last thing I thought I'd ever do was to write from the point of view of a bullet. But by then I'd reached the point where accuracy depends on the speed of a heartbeat. How close is that to pure body? How intimate is that? That's when I thought, oh gosh, I've got to do the bullet. People will think I'm out of my mind!

**CTD:** Most of your books seem to operate in sections. Frequently five sections in a book. Have you ever realized that you would have to actually extract a whole section or add a whole section to make a book work? You talked a little about the Beulah section having to go in. What goes into those decisions?

**RD:** How about agony? Oh, I have extracted whole sections—in fact, I took an entire section out of *American Smooth*. I'm glad now I did it, but I anguished over it for weeks. The book felt too long; around the 3/4 mark one's attention threatened to go off in a different direction, and taking that section out changed the way the book moved. I also realized that section could, and would, become part of another book someday. It was an interesting tangent to the umbrella concept of *American Smooth*, but I decided to let it go for a while. It was a heartrending decision, but one made in service of both the book and, I think, its individual poems.

**CTD:** It's good to know that agony is actually normal and one must continue through it.

**RD:** Through it, yes.

**CTD:** One thing I've heard you say, which is something people often say and I've wondered if it's just self defense or if it really ends up being true, is this idea that something belongs in another book. That poems belong in another place. How frequently do you operate consciously in multiple projects and when do you begin to see how the projects tease apart or come together?

**RD:** I almost always work on multiple projects. When I began writing seriously, I did not do so —not only because I simply didn't have enough poems, but also because I just assumed it wasn't "done." As a young writer one is always looking for role models, and all of my models at the time seemed to proceed in a "manly fashion"—straightforward, linearly—toward their goal. Sometime around the transition from second to third book—the "Dusting" period—I had established a multi-faceted approach, so that I was working on the Thomas poems while I was filling in the holes in the manuscript of Museum. I work best this way. Right now, my desk drawers are full of color-coded plastic folders, and in these folders are drafts of poems at varying stages, and on any given day I will work on more than one of these drafts at a time. As far as that section which I took out of *American Smooth* is concerned. . . I know it belongs to a manuscript—I can almost see it, shadowy—but I don't think it will be the next one. I'm pretty sure another book is going to happen before that. You know, some of the Soldier poems from the section "Not Welcome Here" in *American Smooth* were written in the early 1980's; I continued to work on them over the years but they never found their home until now. Patience, patience. . .

I am immensely comforted by working on many different projects at once. Not only because there is always something in the pot, hopefully, but also because it just seems to fit my temperament. This occurs in other areas of my life, too. For instance, Fred and I went to Venice for Carnival 2005. A friend who's on a Save Venice committee invited us to join their entourage, and we decided it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. So here I was, sewing costumes day and night, yet at the same time I was working on poems in my head. It sounds bizarre but it happened during the poems that became *Mother Love*, too; I started sewing a lot as *Grace Notes* neared publication, and one day Fred commented: "Oh, you're working on a poem." He had figured it out; he knew that I needed to pursue another activity in order to let the creative juices bubble on their own.

**CTD:** I've heard you speak before about your training, while growing up, to be polite. I hear it translated in what many critics say about your work, that a defining feature is that it is reserved. But you say you need to struggle against that politeness, and I imagine that your very public roles as the US poet laureate and now the Virginia poet laureate mean that there's this public eye that you have to worry about—people are going to think I'm crazy, writing about this bullet. How do you find yourself in the actual day-to-day practice of writing a poem working with and against this politeness or this reserve?

**RD:** When I'm writing, the only thing I'm concerned about is being absolutely honest. Whatever the topic, I don't believe in reserve when it comes to exploring it; I am dedicated to following that moment as far as it will take me. If people think I'm out of my mind to write about a bullet, then so be it—because I'm not only going to write about it, I'm going to become that bullet. I don't care if they might say I'm crazy. As an artist, I don't have a choice in the matter—not about whether I'm going to write about something, not about how deep I'm going to go: I will go as deep as I need to. The reserve comes into play in the way that this exploration is expressed, the craft of it. And I do struggle—no, "struggle" is the wrong word—I push against my sense of what a poem should be, and against what has worked technically for me in the past. I push against that cadenced and polished surface. I find it interesting to rough it up but still keep it there. It's like modern dance: You'd better be able to do a split and point your toes and achieve full extension; you are freer to create shapes and moves not permissible in classical ballet. Artistically I struggle with exploring a looser line and more rambling syntax, perhaps a more exuberant rhetoric. A poem like "Hattie McDaniel Arrives at the Coconut Grove," which feels like one long rhapsodic sentence barreling over itself —kind of a blues rant—was a joyous release for me because it's so different from a lot of my poems.

So I don't find the reserve problematic per se. But it is MY thing to work against, pushing, resisting. I am constantly reminding myself: Okay, you're way too polite here, you're editing yourself; can you lighten up a bit, can you be a little messier?

**CTD:** You've said several times that one of your concerns is this idea of speaking for those who have not had their histories on the record. In regards to this and to your project in many of your books (and how others perceive your project in many of your books) what do you think about Helen Vendler's comments relatively early in your career? She suggested that you had made this "Important discovery—blackness need not be one's central subject, but equally need not be omitted."

**RD:** I'm not quite sure what I should say about that quote. It's one thing to read what a critic has written and think: "Oh yeah, that's right!"—to experience that delighted shock of recognition, as I do with much of Helen Vendler's criticism. But it's another thing to think about that commentary in an active way. Part of me bristles at having to engage myself artistically with a critic's perception of me. I would say this: One of the big stumbling blocks I have had to get over was coming to terms with what Blackness meant to me as an artist. Is that my central concern? Or is that one concern among many? It took a lot of going back and forth before I felt confident enough to admit that I don't really care to think about any of these "themes," these "concepts" when I'm writing. I am in the moment; I'm filtering the moment through language and through my self, through my artistic heart, which may be 60% Black, 40% Female one day but 10% Black, 50% Female, 40% Dancer —whatever!—the next.

Frankly, I just want to write the poems. Of course I want to be true to the task. And because I'm Black and because I'm female and because I'm the age that I am at this particular time on this earth, certain aspects of my environment and my society are going to come through in the work.

I've had the luxury of coming of age as a writer at a time when I could make these choices. So many generations of Black writers before me could not afford to attend artistically to their full human selves because the critical reception would not permit it. They had to "be Black" or nothing. Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example, had to make a decision: Was he going to write the poems of conflicted Black identity—"We wear the mask that grins and lies"—or was he going to be the happy-

go-lucky folk poet who penned *Lyrics of Lowly Life*?

I will say that because of my birthright—my genetic makeup, if you will—I am more receptive to the stories of people who've been sidelined by history. It is part of my heritage and therefore has become, I suppose, one of my themes. One could argue that if there's one influence being both female and African-American has had on my aesthetics it is that I've had both the opportunity to watch from the sidelines, and to insert myself into the mainstream and insist upon my presence. One is a passive stance; the other is something you have to do, actively. So Helen Vendler's comment, and my own perception of my mission, actually complement one other. It's a complicated balance.

**CTD:** You've said before that you think that many critiques of writers are framed in terms of aesthetics when what is really at the heart of the question is class.

**RD:** One finds it to be the case more and more, particularly in academia, which is an entirely different ball of wax; the way gender and race impinge upon one's sensibility is dramatically different from the world of business or simply making it out there in the world at large. Class becomes all important. And yet—to mix it up a bit—we must remember that we are living in an era where African-Americans can enter the hallowed arena of academia a bit more easily than our forefathers and mothers. Our predecessors, no matter how intelligent they were, were not welcomed into the ivied compounds of America and therefore could not enjoy the casual privileges of university life. It used to be that class and status was achieved as a consequence of one's bloodlines and/or financial circumstances; the advent of academia as a sanctioned group has shaken up the socioeconomic equilibrium.

None of this is clear-cut. I've become cautious about class and race distinctions because I feel that sometimes we, as African-Americans, will opt for the easier mark of race as the factor that galvanizes inequalities when in fact it is due to class—quite often class more than race, at least nowadays. Not that race doesn't matter; but class is an issue we haven't quite dealt with yet.

**CTD:** You sew, you play music, you dance, you play the cello, you do a lot of things very well. What is it that keeps you coming back to the poetry? You've written a novel and a play, essays, you do a lot of different things, but why poetry?

**RD:** It is hard, sort of like asking why we fall in love with x and not y or z. The easy answer —though it's true, it's a little too easy—is that poetry unfolds at the heart of the language. If one is going to succumb to the spell of writing, then it seems to me that poetry is the purest love. It's adoring the very syllables on which everything hinges. And not only the syllables, but the breath between syllables. It verges on the first utterance ever made by Homo Sapiens that was understood by another Homo Sapiens. Therefore, writing poetry approaches anthropology. And it embodies music, because it relies on sound, sound that has been made to spawn an emotional response. And then history comes in, and linguistics. History because words change their meaning, and the way that they make us feel changes with that meaning. All those layers!

If I were to couch it in the negative, I would say that poetry satisfies so many of my other interests. Though it goes deeper that. I mean, I could say it takes on music, for example, or that when I string words into sentences that spiral down the invisible central axis on the page, the thrill derived from fitting things together—which in turn become a third, larger entity—is similar to sewing or doing crossword puzzles, two of my passionate hobbies. Gosh! Then there's the lure of history with its event trajectories and my general love for books—the feel of pages turning, the discovery of little-known facts, philosophy of why we are here and keep insisting on proclaiming, "We are here! We are here!" Poetry can contain all of those things. To me it's the noblest of the arts.

And: I can do it alone. I'm not dependent on anybody else to make a poem work. One of the frustrations of ballroom dancing, for instance, is that you have to do it with another person; if that person's good then the dancing can be great, and if he's not you're thinking, "Oh, let me go, I can do better than this!" But you can't, not by yourself. There are problems with music as well—in another life I was a cellist, and unless I was playing the *Bach Unaccompanied Suites for Cello*, I needed a piano accompanying me, or the other three members of a string quartet. Although I like working with other people, poetry is one thing I can do alone.

I warned you I was going to take the negative approach, but the main reason is positive: Nothing beats being able to articulate how I feel or an imagined character feels, using words that hopefully convey more than they actually mean because of their sounds, or because of the way they look on the page, or how the sentences underscore the unsaid as they butt up against the right margin as they travel the page. Putting together this four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle (there are probably more dimensions than that!), is incredibly exciting.

Poetry was my first real passion. It will always be my true love. It is glorious and impossible and bigger than me. Much much bigger than me.

**CTD:** How do you think that your poetry has influenced other poets?

**RD:** Whew, that's a big question! If anything, I'm part of a tradition that is still growing among African American poets: That is, finally exploring the freedom to write about anything we choose without it necessarily having to be about "being black"— whatever one imagines by that. To have

the poetry emanate from the entire person, with race, gender, age, etc. emerging in the poems as needed, as they color the life, without such distinctions being the sole point of the poem. I hope poets of my generation and younger no longer feel the "burden of explanation"—that is, the expectation from the mainstream that as a "minority"—oh, I hate that word!—we should explain our cultural references in the text of the work itself. You know, the Norton Anthology has footnotes telling you what a bodkin is or what Keats meant by "lucent fans" of "dales of Arcady "; and no one thinks anything of looking up all the footnotes to "The Wasteland." And yet an African American writer would be expected to explicate "Dixie Peach" within the context of the poem. What I'm saying is we should be able to write "Dixie Peach" in full confidence that a reader won't merely ask, "What the hell is that?" and feel excluded, but will be interested enough to look it up. I think the more diverse our writing becomes, the more it touches on all aspects of life as if it's the most natural thing in the world—and it is—then the more that burden will be relieved. I do think that some of that is contained in my work.

**CTD:** So do you see African American poetry moving in any particular direction?

**RD:** I see it moving in every direction you can look at, and I think that's fabulous. From performance poetry and slams to sonnets and villanelles—we're using all of the musics out there, and that's the way it should be.

**CTD:** My final question is a quote from your own poem "And Counting": "When the sky's the limit, how can you tell you've gone too far?"

**RD:** I ask myself that question to make sure I keep going further. You might want to say to some writers, "Put a lid on it"; I always have to remind myself to dare a bit more, because I have a natural tendency to be economical in my work, not to wander "off topic" or get too rhapsodic. It has to do with being a good daughter but also, as an African-American, wearing Dunbar's mask, not letting people know they're getting to you. Consequently, I have erected a force field to protect myself and my work. So I must continually remind myself that I have to push on until I hit the edge of the sky. Until something bounces me back. And maybe, maybe it won't happen at all, you'll just keep flying! What holds me back is my inclination toward rigor. That's a good thing too, but one's strong points can widen into pitfalls.

So that line in my poem is an admonition to fly. You might go too high, you might pass out from lack of oxygen and fall back to earth, maybe the air will no longer hold you up. But you can't really figure that out until it happens, so you might as well go on up there, and keep going.

## Discussion Guide for Readers of Rita Dove's *American Smooth*

*Both the Reader's and Writer's guides for American Smooth were written by Diana Cruz, Assistant Professor of English at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her research and writing focus primarily on the genre of poetry. Her article, "Refuting Exile: Rita Dove Reading Melvin B. Tolson" is forthcoming in Callaloo.*

### Questions for Discussion

1. In many of Dove's poems, beginning with the first, "All Souls," there are Edenic references and metaphors that evoke Adam & Eve, Paradise, and desire. In what other poems are these references and metaphors present? How do these metaphors connect to the subject of American-ness? If you could pick one event in American history that constitutes a "fall," what event would you choose?

2. In "All Souls," how many ways might you interpret the lines: "Of course the world had changed/ for good…." What changes does the poem chronicle? What is lost? Is anything gained, according to the poem? If so, is the gain worth the loss? What other poems in the volume might help to answer this last question?

3. At the start of the volume, Dove includes definitions of American, smooth, and American Smooth. What role do these definitions play in combination with the histories explored in "The Passage," "Ripont" and "Hattie McDaniel Arrives at the Coconut Grove"?

4. After reading "I have been a stranger in a strange land," what do you think of the figure of Eve? How does her representation in this poem compare to the ways she is represented in Genesis in the Bible? Think about the epigraph to the poem. How do Emily Dickinson's words assist the poem's meditation on Eve? How might Dickinson's words help to shape our thinking about women, American-ness and desire as we read more of the poems in the volume?

5. As we learn in the second to last of Dove's Acknowledgements, "All section epigraphs are remarks made by Lieutenant Commander Tuvok of the Federation Starship Voyager—a character in the television series Star Trek: Voyager (1995-2001)." Why might Dove have chosen to quote this character in light of the volume's themes? As you revisit the section epigraphs, think about the role they play in combination with each section's poems.

6. In her definition of American Smooth, Dove emphasizes improvisation. What kind of impact does her improvisation have on the section "Twelve Chairs"? Be sure to read the note that corresponds to this section as you think about it. How many poems are in this section? How do you read the significance of the poem "The Alternate" at the end of section? How do you read the significance of the poem in a larger American context?

7. In "Brown," who is speaking in the first line of the poem? To whom is she speaking? Does the main speaker critique anything and/or anyone in the poem? If so, what and/or who? What about the speaker's focus on color throughout the poem? Think especially about brown and red in the context of this poem and the entire volume as you answer this last question.

8. In the poem "Fox," to whom might "she" refer?

9. In the title poem "American Smooth," the speaker characterizes at least part of the experience of the dance as "perfect agony." According to the poem, what is perfect about the dance? What is agonizing about it? What does the act of smiling represent in the poem?

10. In "The Castle Walk," how do the themes of song, dance, and race converge in the poem's meditation?

11. In a wide range of contexts, such as dance and war, the subject of human beings' vulnerability surfaces and resurfaces throughout the volume. Think of the vulnerability of the soldier, for example, in "Noble Sissle's Horn" and "Alfonzo Prepares to Go Over the Top". What problems do the soldiers face? What are their strategies for confronting these problems? When answering this last question, consider the choices offered the soldier in the last line of "Noble Sissle's Horn."

12. How do you make sense of the presence of an entire section of poems entitled "Not Welcome Here," in a volume entitled *American Smooth*, where smooth has been defined as "… free from irregularities" and/or "having no obstructions or difficulties"?

13. A good number of poems in the volume make some reference to the heart. See the poems "Heart to Heart" and "From Your Valentine," for example. How is the heart portrayed in these poems? Does the representation of the heart in these poems connect to any of the meditations on dance, song, war, and/or race in the volume?

14. What is the nature of the flowering plant described in "Evening Primrose"? Is there anything to admire about this plant? Why, do you think, does the entire last section of the volume share a title with this poem? Do the poems in this section have anything in common?

## Writer's Craft Guide for Rita Dove's *American Smooth*

*Written by Diana Cruz*

1. In "All Souls'" in *American Smooth*, the last sentence in the second stanza states "This was the true loss." What do you think "this" is according to the poem? Do you have another idea about what the true loss was in this moment in the Garden of Eden? If you think about American history, what, do you think, has been America's true loss? What has been America's greatest gain?

2. Numerous poems in *American Smooth* with dance and song at their centers treat these forms of self-expression both as opportunities for freedom and escape and, sometimes, a source of pain and pressure. Revisit some of these poems, such as “Fox Trot Fridays,” “Samba Summer” and “Rhumba.” How are dance and song represented in these poems? Find another poem in the volume that represents dance and song differently. What was your view of dance and song before reading Dove’s volume? Do you see the power of either or both differently now that you have read *American Smooth*?

3. Often the Biblical story of Adam & Eve is sought for its characterization of the first “fall,” where Eve is primarily responsible for that fall. How is Eve recast in “‘I have been a stranger in a strange land’”? If you could make Adam talk in a poem to parallel this one, what would you have him say?

4. In some poems in *American Smooth*, we come to understand what something is by first understanding what it is not. For example, in “Heart to Heart” we are told “It’s neither red/nor sweet.” In “Evening Primrose” the flowering plant is described as “Neither rosy nor prim.” What do you think of this device as means for exploring the nature of the heart and evening primrose? What about the effect of this device in “Describe Yourself in Three Words or Less” and “Eliza, Age 10, Harlem”?

5. Desire, dreams, imagination, and improvisation are at the heart of *American Smooth*—so much so that they are named or referenced in the body of a good number of poems. See “Fox,” “Sic Itur Ad Astra,” “Desk Dreams,” and “Against Flight” for examples. Beyond the context of these individual poems, how are desire, dreams, imagination, and improvisation responsible for the America—good and bad, positive and negative—that exists today?

6. In “Reverie in Open Air,” the speaker is characterized as a “stranger”—a stranger to what? Is the speaker’s struggle one with which you can identify? How do you evaluate the speaker’s response? In this situation, what would your response be?

7. A number of poems in the volume provoke meditations on Paradise, perfection, and magnificence. How do poems such as “I have been a stranger in a strange land,” “Fox Trot Fridays,” and “Desert Backyard” put popularly abstract notions of Paradise, perfection, and magnificence in context?

8. In “The Return of Lieutenant James Reese Europe,” what kind of American is speaking? What is his attitude toward America? What evidence do we have of his “American good will”? If you were in the speaker’s position, do you think you would respond to America in the same way?

9. What do you think of this collection of poems, which opens in the Garden of Eden and then brings us back down to earth in the final poem, “Looking Up from the Page, I Am Reminded of This Mortal Coil”? Retracing your steps from poem to poem, do you feel a tug of war between the two, earth and Paradise, at times? Which seems to be favored in the volume? Which do you favor?

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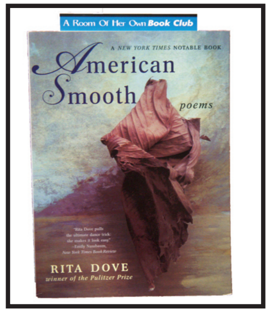
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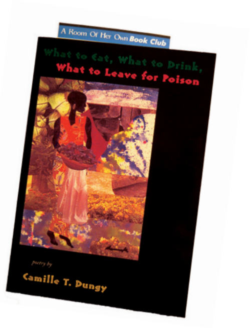
## Camille Dungy's *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*


A Room Of Her Own Book Club
What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison
poetry by
Camille T. Dungy

Camille T. Dungy is the author of *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* (Red Hen Press, 2006), a finalist for the PEN Center USA 2007 Literary Award, and the Library of Virginia 2007 Literary Award. Dungy has received fellowships from organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts, The Virginia Commission for the Arts, Cave Canem, Bread Loaf, the Dana Award, and the American Antiquarian Society. Dungy is Associate Professor in the Creative Writing Department at San Francisco State University. Editor of *Black Nature: A Poetry Anthology* (University of Georgia Press, 2009), she is co-editor of *From the Fishouse: An Anthology of Poems that Sing, Rhyme, Resound, Syncopate, Alliterate, and Just Plain Sound Great* (Persea Books, 2009) and assistant editor of *Gathering Ground: A Reader Celebrating Cave Canem's First Decade* (University of Michigan Press, 2006). Her second poetry collection is due from Red Hen Press in 2010. Her poems have been published widely in anthologies, and print and online journals. Recent work can be found online at From the Fishouse, Drunken Boat #9, and Electronic Poetry Review.

### A Conversation with Camille Dungy

**Interview with Xochiquetzal Candelaria; transcription by Arisa White.**

*Poet, **Xochiquetzal Candelaria** holds degrees from UC Berkeley and New York University. Her work has appeared in The Nation, New England Review, Gulf Coast, Seneca Review and other magazines. She has received fellowships from Vermont Studio Center, Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, Hall Farm Center for the Arts, Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, and the LEF Foundation. Her awards include a 2006 Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize, the Louisiana Literature Prize for Poetry, and the Gulf Coast Poetry Prize. She currently lives in San Francisco and has poems forthcoming in the Seattle Review and Afugabe: A Journal of Poetry.*

***Arisa White** is a Cave Canem fellow and holds a MFA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Forthcoming in fall 2008 by Factory Hollow Press is her chapbook Disposition for Shininess. She received a Poets & Writers grant in 2008 and was awarded the 2007 Pavel Strut Fellowship in Poetry from the University of Western Michigan. In 2006 she received the Archie D. and Bertha H. Walker Scholarship from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and a writing residency at the Atlantic Center for the Arts. Her poem "Who Invited the Monkey to Omen's Party" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2005. She is featured on the recently released cd, WORD, with the Jessica Jones Quartet. Her work has appeared in Third Coast, The Drunken Boat, Gathering Ground: Cave Canem 10th Anniversary Reader, Meridians, Softblow, Snowvigate.com, Failbetter.com, A Gathering of Tribes, and African Voices. Additionally, her poems are featured in the anthology and staged production of Fingernails Across A Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose on HIV/AIDS from the Black Diaspora.*

**Xochiquetzal Candelaria*:*** The title poem of *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* brings to mind recipes for survival. How are themes of self-preservation and self-care expressed throughout book?

**Camille Dungy:** That was part of my point in the titling. The book follows two couples and the ways that historical situation affected their ambitions and their abilities to fulfill their personal love and desires. I don't know that I completely buy the phrase "that which does not kill you makes you stronger" because I think history bares out that a lot of things kill people and the survivors aren't necessarily stronger. Still, I was hoping, through the different sections, to show different ways to access the tools for survival and the tools to thrive, that they often come from unlikely places. The first section is the tracking of—if not failed then—a troubled marriage, with two people who had very noble personal, professional, and interpersonal ambitions, but racism and also sexism just made it too hard to live in the same place and move along the same track. In the middle of the book, there are all these other figures, iconic figures. They add this pastiche of different coping mechanisms, often very brash and very bold modes of making a place for themselves. So by the last section of the book you get these characters who are faced with similar kinds of struggles and come up with entirely different solutions. Both realities, at the beginning and the end of the book, are completely true and completely real and completely justifiable. I don't want to point a finger at the first couple and say oh, what a failure—that was just their reality. And the second ending—I like ending on the happy—that ending is also a reality that took a certain set of personalities and a certain set of opportunities and experiences to make happen. As a guidebook, I guess, the book reveals that there are many different paths and each of them is real.

**XC:** The first poem is titled "Language" and is set apart from the rest of the book and seems to function as a paean to nature and the inexpressible. What do you perceive as the connection between the outdoors and what cannot be named in your work?

**CTD:** Throughout the book there are nature poems that introduce each section, and then the title poem that closes the book. The natural world is our world and it's not separate from who and where we are. A connection or disconnection from that indicates to me a connection or disconnection from part of the self. By starting the book with a poem that talks about the language we speak being so influenced by the world in which we live, in particular the trees, the rocks, and rivers that are around us, I wanted to ground the concept of a larger way of looking at the human struggle within a very global and very universal idea of living things.

**XC:** That brings me to my third question, that many of the poems, in addition to being about struggle, are rich with landscape—sun drenched, sweet hidden water, sand carpeted caves, country roads. It's as if the reader is being fed a diet of primary elements: earth, wind, fire, and water, bringing to mind the importance of place in Native American poetry as a path to healing. Have you been influenced at all by Native American poetry?

**CTD:** I wish I could answer yes to that question. I think there are some poets I very much admire, Sherwin Bitsui pops to mind immediately, but I don't know if I was consciously thinking about that in the process of writing this book. I cannot claim that. I grew up in southern California before it was entirely paved over. I grew up with uncultivated land as my playground. And so when I think of the world, I see it filtered through the lens of the landscape where I was learning language at the same time. That's probably how that came into my own work.

**XC:** You recently edited an anthology of African American nature poetry, titled *Black Nature*. What was the impetus for this project and do you identify as an African American nature poet?

**CTD:** I guess I do now. It has been a development over a number of years, and I have to thank a couple friends for really pressing me to publicize my work in that way and to talk about the fact that I was writing out of a different kind of nature aesthetic. So as I started to wander off and talk about this idea and broaden the demographic for who got to be nature writers at conferences and readings, the invitation to do the anthology for the University of Georgia Press came. When they asked me to do the anthology and asked if I could send a proposal with the names of a few poets I would include, I had the poets already. I knew—it wasn't like I had to dig for my first examples of who to include in the anthology. They were right there. They were the poets I had been reading and teaching. But they haven't been talked about within those terms. I think it's happening more and more and so we are going to start seeing significantly more scholarship on a wider demographic of people who write about the natural world. But ownership is what ownership is, and entitlement is what it is. There has been a certain number of people, a small set of people, who get to own and claim the land. There are others of us who are beginning to combat that concept.

**XC:** I have had the pleasure of hearing you read and there seems to be certain poems in *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* that bring the house down. What comes to mind is the petite poem named "What You Want." Why do you think such a little thing packs such a satisfying punch for women as well as men?

**CTD:** I don't know. You've dated a lot; I've dated a lot. There's something for both genders, something powerful and real. We know what we want and yet it's a little bit terrifying because the moment we find it or claim it, it's bigger than us, and it will shift and change us entirely, and most people aren't ready for it. Most people aren't ready to allow that. There must be something about that poem that distills the effects of the feminine version of that true need, that true desire, that resonates with people. And then also makes them a little bit uncomfortable. So then they kind of laugh and smile and giggle at the same time that they acknowledge there's something there.

**XC:** Can you talk a little more about the poem in terms of context?

**CTD:** It might have something to do with the way I introduce the poem. I always mention that I had a friend who was serially dating at the time I wrote it. He would come back and tell me about all these women who were not quite right for this reason and weren't quite right for that reason but he kept dating this one because she was really good in this way but not in that way. I would have supper with him and listen to the saga of the women. Once, I interrupted and asked what I should read at an event we were going to the next day—and he said, Read that poem, what's it called? I think it's called, "What I Need." But it's called, "What You Want." It is about an incredibly strong, confident, beautiful, powerful woman who would take you over in a sense—but that is what he needed. It turned out to be kind of what he got. In the end he finally got married to the woman he needed. But in those years he was afraid of that.

**XC:** There are a number of persona poems that make the book feel like a house with many rooms occupied by many people. How did these voices develop?

**CTD:** I have always written in persona since I was little. I think when I was younger, in junior high, high school, I didn't have much of my own to talk about that seemed necessary. But I was around my sister, who's a historian now; my parents' library; my grandparents' anecdotes; and I was always marching on MLK day, so I was exposed to what I thought were really important stories. And I remember hearing many interesting people say, I have always wanted to write a book. So I have taken the charge to do some of that telling for people who can't or haven't done it themselves, people who have narratives from which I can learn. It's not interesting to me to write a poem if I cannot learn from it. That's how I think I get into the persona poem. I want to try to figure out how people get from A to Q. And the way that I figured out how to do that was through poetry.

**XC:** Many of your poems dealing with African-American history and historical figures, seem to celebrate, critique and grapple with the African-American experience. I see this strategy as an unconditional, literary embrace of a people. Would you agree? Would you call this intentional?

**CTD:** That's a really interesting way to think about that, because sitting down at the table without preconditions is important to me. You can't have a conversation with somebody with preconditions. If I were to say, well Kathryn—that's my sister—I'll talk to you as long as you absolutely stop doing x, y and z, things which are fundamentally a part of my sister, I'm not going to get any real information. She's going to come shielded. She's going to come coding her language. She's not going to be true. We are fundamentally flawed as human beings, and unless I accept that position of us as flawed and sometimes cruel and sometimes stupid and sometimes just naïve, unintentionally or intentionally so, then I'm not going to get any truth out of anybody I talk to. And when I am writing a poem to or for a person, I am talking to them in a different way. One of the problems when you're writing poetry, particularly out of an ethnic center or out of representing a sort of demographic, we spend so much of our lives defending ourselves against that external view of us where we are bad, where we are flawed and the flaws are all anybody sees. An easy response is to try to portray ourselves as perfect and heroic and the Queens of Sheba, and etcetera, etcetera. But the Queens of Sheba have some fundamental flaws. I think that in the African American community, we have only been able to do that really recently because we are just one generation out of what I call apartheid—people get really upset with me when I say that, so I'll say segregation, however you want to call it. It's only this generation that's really allowed to reinvestigate the heroes and talk about them with any kind of truth. If we don't do that then they become puppets. They become Macy's Day Parade balloons that are entirely unreal and therefore not useful. I will take my leaders and my family without condition and appreciate them in that way the best I can.

**XC:** Do you see your poetic project as always containing multitudes or do you have plans for books written from one intimate, personal perspective?

**CTD:** I have a project in mind that I would love to be from the perspective of one woman, but even if I did that, what fascinates me about her is that she was seventeen different people over the course of her life. Even if I did do one person, it would be so varied. But then I think that nobody lives in isolation, so as I try to focus on one person what would inevitably happen is her husband would start to talk or the lady across the street. You know, we all exist in a community. And I will not say no, but I somehow doubt that I will ever be able to have just a single voice

sustained throughout a book. Who knows, maybe one day I will develop a different kind of concentration that I don't have now.

**XC:** Speaking of voice, have you ever thought of writing fiction so as to give your characters more time and space to speak their minds?

**CTD:** I think about it all the time. All the time. There are two things going against it. One, I teach full time and to enter a fiction project, for me, it would take months of purely designated time and the life that I have lived thus far has not allowed for that. Actually, more importantly, I have had several projects that I thought were going to be my novel and I sat down with time, like at Yaddo or some place where I really did have time—I might have gotten a solid start on something and then it turns into eighteen lines. It is just something about the way I write that forces condensation. I think I write poetry because every other way I articulate my thoughts is long—as you are discovering here. As I write I get a chance to edit down to the pits of what it is I really want to talk about. That's what I like better in the end. I like the nugget inside all the things that I have been saying. That me-in-fourteen-lines me.

**XC:** That brings me to my next question: Many of the poems in *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* are sonnets. What is it about the sonnet that spoke to you?

**CTD:** I love the form. It's so condensed. You have to get an argument fully developed and expanded upon and then re-expanded upon and then concluded, either in the same direction or in a new direction, in fourteen lines! And, honestly, you can't have those lines be more than fifteen syllables without them being completely unwieldy. I don't necessarily believe that the sonnet has to be the sonnet as Shakespeare invented it, because Shakespeare reinvented a tenth generation of reinventions of the sonnet that was imported from a reinvention. So I don't believe there is a platonic form of sonnet. I think the sonnet itself allows for a lot of flexibility, so in the book I think of the poems as sonnets. I call them rogue sonnets to appease old teachers of mine who told me I was not allowed to call them total sonnets, but I like the roguishness. I don't necessarily have iambic pentameter lines, but a lot of the lines are ten syllables long. They are all fourteen lines or twenty-eight lines, so they are either single or double sonnets. They all employ a volta. They employ some of the conventions I decided were important. It made sense to vary them somewhat for here are these African American folks who are making their way in early 20th-century America, trying to get into Harvard, Colgate and Yale and not allowed to. Why should they have to keep to all of the conventions when they are not allowed into those forms, when they are not allowed into all those conventional routes? And so they take some of what they want and discard what they don't want, they make the best out of the form. It's survival. Back to that other question: Modes of survival, which African Americans have employed forever, of taking what is useful. What have we done with the hog? We have done some completely amazing things with that pig. Taking what has been offered, granted, or thrown away and making beautiful, wonderful, delicious things. I thought the sonnet form worked for this subject matter.

**XC:** What advice would you give other poets concerning subject matter, craft and process—other women writers?

**CTD:** I think those are inseparable ideas—subject, craft and process. How we write and what we write and the way we write all make a difference. If I have a journal that is lined and five-and-a-half inches long by eight inches—those small, little journals—what I write is going to look different than what I write in a big art journal that is twelve inches square with no lines. Also really, truly letting yourself explore where you write. Can you find a quiet space, can you learn how to write in the library? Lucille Clifton said she writes small in size, not small in content, small in size poems because she raised five children. She didn't have time and the setting to write "Corson's Inlet." She didn't have the time and space to write forty- to eighty-line poems. She made the space that she had available to her work for her. So the craft, the function, the tools that she had and the time and the space she had affected the way she wrote and what she wrote. Rather than saying, I'm raising five children and I don't have time, she said, I'm raising five children, how do I make the time that I have work for me? She has these really small poems that are like aphorisms, but somehow she makes those poems work on seven levels at once. So she makes her words really rotate within, as opposed to what you might do if you had lots of pages and lots of hours, you might write seven or twelve different lines to do the same thing she makes two words do. The craft, the actual technique of her process is affected by the she gets to it. And it's also affected by what she feels she needs to say. She writes different poems. Don't fight it, think about it and sit with it and decide who you are and how you are and how you can be the best at that.

**XC:** A number of our male contemporary poets seem to write longer poems. Do you think gender plays a part, in terms of the length of a poem?

**CTD:** I think generally that might be true. I also think that I am now writing really long poems, like 4- 5- 6-page long poems, which probably has something to do with the fact that my teaching schedule and my life is such that right now I have more time to stay in a poem. The way that I used to compose was to write a poem and then another poem that spoke to the idea of the first poem and so on. Miles Davis used to say that what John Coltrane did was play the same note as many different ways as possible, and that's what I was trying to do with *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*. Now I can stay in a poem longer. If I were able to start a family I have a feeling that luxury of length would probably go away again because I have 5, 6, 8 hours at a time to sit down. If I had children, for several years at least (laughter), I would not have that length of time and so it's probably something to do with that. It's probably something historically to do with simple access to materials. What I have noticed—I don't know if the actual facts of this bear out but—my personal experience has been that the more competitive a writers colony or artist colony the more men there are there. The less competitive ones tend to be equal in the number of men or they have more women, and at highly competitive ones the men start showing up. So where you get more money or time or space all to yourself, now (laughter) the men start showing up. So I guess there's more opportunity for men to have the space in which to spread out!

**XC:** What can readers expect next? As a writer, are you enthralled with something presently?

**CTD:** I am totally enthralled with something I'm writing presently, but it's in a pretty early phase, so if I talk about it then there's no imperative to write about it. My next book is coming out relatively soon, so I can talk about that. The way the publishing world tends to work is that my completion of a work is about 3 or 4 years ahead of your seeing it. The next book is called *Suck on the Marrow*, and it is another historical narrative. It focuses on fewer people than *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*, about six characters. There are other people who come in and out of those characters' lives, but we look closely at the six. I purposely didn't write it in sonnets because I wanted to explore a more open form. I wanted to see what could happen if I lengthened my poems and wrote longer lines. Still, I knew the collection was finished when I wrote a series of sonnets at the end (laughs) in the voice of the man who had started the whole book. I came full circle back to writing sonnets, and that's how I knew the project was finished. So, that's coming out in January of 2010. It's set in the 1800's, the mid 1830's to mid 1850's, both in Virginia and Philadelphia. I was living in Virginia at the time and spending a lot of time trying to figure out the legacies of that place. I also knew that one of the ways we don't frequently talk about, one of the ways new slaves were delivered to the very insatiable market, was through kidnapping people from the north. There is this perception that you got to cross the Mason-Dixon line and all was better, you were safe, and that was absolutely not true. The slave narratives at the time bear out that that is not true. People don't tend to talk about that part of the Harriett Jacobs story. She gets up there, up North, and still is writing under a pen name partly because she doesn't want to be recaptured, right? So I just got really, really intrigued by that combination of ideas, and also the idea of what it meant to human relationships to either have a spouse taken into slavery or to have to think about the different ways you could escape yourself while attending to family or loved ones in that planning. It's a very individual pursuit, yet to sustain a relationship through it you'd have to take other people into consideration. So these became some of the reflections in the book.

**XC:** You've been talking about characters, about experience in terms of honoring the many facets of community, truth and beauty. This sounds like a long and intricate process. Did you always know you were going to be a poet?

**CTD:** I have always written. I used to do all of the family holiday cards. You know, I would write their birthday cards and write little poems. I even invented my own language. I think a lot of kids invent their own languages. No? (laughs) Okay, well I invented my own language. I had a little dictionary. I wish I could find that. Then I thought I had to be a useful human citizen and there were all these things I was going to do and be a writer on the side. I finally settled on becoming a physician. My father's a physician. My husband thinks I still should have been one because I get real excited whenever there's a wound around that I get to tend. (laughter) It's fun... if it's on someone else's body. So, that was my plan, and I was a big science geek and did all that stuff. But in college, at Stanford, in the margins of my O Chem notes and my molecular biology notes I wrote poems. At the same time I was taking O Chem and molecular biology I was taking Reading and Writing Poetry, and that's all I wanted to spend my time on. I just really didn't care about isomers (laughs) that much and it's stuff you need to care about. I mean, it's foundational work for the rest of your time. It bothered me that I didn't care because I didn't think you should spend the rest of your life on something you weren't in love with. So I quit. I spent all my energy on poetry, and that was that. I've had a few times in my life where I've had to make a decision between one thing that I kind of liked and one thing that I really liked. You don't have time, the world doesn't grant us time to dedicate ourselves to too many things at once. When you're dedicated at the level I want to be to poetry, I had to let that other part of me go. Now sometimes… I mean, I live in an incredibly expensive city where it's really hard to be an artist. San Francisco. The property values here have made it essentially unsustainable for an artist class because we always have to be worried about grants or other jobs, and we can't just be spending our time on art. So I look around and say, "Wow, it would be nice to own property," "Wow, I should really have thought about that dermatology practice I wanted" you know, because I could have that life. But I made that decision and I can go back to that moment when I made that choice and decide again that that was the proper choice. I knew it came with certain sacrifices.

**XC:** Thinking of the title *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* and your response

about how it's a recipe for survival and it's a way for you to embrace and acknowledge the African American experience, how does this square with your personal experience?

**CTD:** My father is an academic physician which means that we have moved from university town to university town to university town, which tended to be very white, and so I've always been one of the very few. I went to high school in Iowa City, Iowa and everybody knew who I was because we were the black family with the Volvo. So I think I've always experienced life through the lens of being one of the few. The select opportunities I've had where I am not the only person of color: Cave Canem, Ghana, have been lovely because all of a sudden the psychic space that is filled with the knowledge of the way other people are perceiving you and the way that you need to present yourself suddenly becomes freed up. I was at Walgreens this morning when a lady asked me if I worked there. It was completely innocent on her part and cannot be received innocently on my part. And it just changes my whole day, and it makes me grumpy for a little while. But to have race not be the main focus allows for other social dramas. I'm not saying that there's anything utopic about being around people of color—it's just different.

I do think that part of the story I needed to tell in *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* was the story of a longstanding educated black community. It's long, long standing and overlooked, and so in that book everybody is a college graduate and most of them have graduate degrees. That's a too infrequently told story. I think when I tackle persona it's important for me to tackle people we don't talk about and often are in communities where they are overlooked, where they've been there all along and people just don't notice them. In *Suck on the Marrow* one of the characters runs away from her little southern town, not a plantation but a town. She doesn't run away to the north, she runs further into the southern town. She just goes downtown where it's harder to find her. How could you say, "Oh I saw your maid when I was hanging out by the whorehouse"? Right? You're not, you can't, that's so forbidden. There is a kind of security in running into this particular kind of section of the world, and it was actually relatively common though we don't hear about that very much. So that, to me, is really interesting. The character who does run north doesn't do it by trekking through the woods. I illustrate another means of escape that was viable, one that happened but not one that's often talked about. So that's the exciting thing to me. Maybe that's part of it, having been so individual and so unique all my life and yet very often taken at such a base face value, it's important for me that if I'm going to speak for other people I bring out their individuality. Their uniqueness and their real story, not the one people presume for them.

**XC:** In a way then could we say that *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* is your story?

**CTD:** That's an intriguing question. Certainly, *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* contains stories that stem from the realities of my own family's experience, and my own community's experience. That book was an exploration of a world I came from. In the coming book, *Suck on the Marrow*, there's a wonderfully wicked character who is very interested in science and is kind of crafty. She has a certain way, let's say, with the guy who is in love with her that is not necessarily gentle though she doesn't mean to be mean. She's just focused on the things on which she's focused. My ex-boyfriend said to me at one point, "Molly's you, right?" I had no intention of Molly being me, but the second he said it I understood there were certain traits in her that I very much admired. That's certainly true about many of the figures in *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*. Even those figures from whom I've learned what not to do demonstrate traits I find familiar, recognizable. I think that when I'm writing, when I'm really writing well, I don't see myself in the process, but I know when I read it later I might find myself there. Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing when we write? Or when we read great literature? Don't we see ourselves in all the characters? Maybe I'm not seeing myself as author. Maybe I'm just doing what it is I aspire to do by writing characters in which the self can be reflected when you're reading it. When you pick up *Anna Karenina* you'll sometimes want to be Anna and sometimes really not because she's either doing something you would never do or doing something you wish you would never do. Yet that's what works in great literature, the moment of self reflection that a reader is allowed to have. That's the final thing I'm aspiring to. If channeling real emotions or real kinds of, lets say, emotive experience of my own lets it be viable for other people, that's my point. It's not a matter of confessionalism for me. It's a matter of making life, rendering life on the page.

## Discussion Guide for Readers of Camille Dungy's *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*

*Written by Diana Cruz, Assistant Professor of English at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her research and writing focus primarily on the genre of poetry. Her article, "Refuting Exile: Rita Dove Reading Melvin B. Tolson" is forthcoming in Callaloo.*

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The poem "Language" is the first in Dungy's collection and sets the tone for the rest of the volume. The first word in the poem, ironically, is "Silence" and the first line of the poem suggests that "Silence is one part of speech." How do Dungy's meditations on what is said—and what isn't said in explicit verbal terms—speak to the power of language in this poem and others, such as "How She Didn't Say It" and "The Preachers Eat Out"?

2. The speaker in a number of poems throughout the volume such as "Language," "Concordance," and "Appearances" refers to codes, codification and/or the act of decoding. What do these references tell us about the transparency of language? Is it the poet's job to make things clear for us in her poems, or, sometimes does she do otherwise? Should she do otherwise?

3. History plays an important role in *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*. There are public histories of such prominent figures as Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Richard Wright, Jack Johnson, and Jacob Lawrence, and private histories such as those of the speaker's grandfather, grandmother, mother, uncle, and sister. What other public and private histories appear in the volume? How do public and private histories converge in poems like "Depression," "From Someplace," "Appearances," and "In His Library"?

4. Consider the organization of the collection and the construction of Dungy's poems. For example, she inserts spaces, pauses and gaps into her book. How and why does she do this? What are we as readers supposed to be doing in such moments? Why does Dungy divide the volume into sections with title pages corresponding to the poems "Concordance," "Here's $100, 'Cause I'll Be Coming Back The Other Way," and "Book Smart"? How do the poems "Language," "Long Time Gone, Long Time Yet To Come," and "Fear" correspond to the sections they precede?

5. What is "it" in the poem "How It Happened"?

6. In "Black Boy," the speaker argues against regretting pain and grief when they are the "mortar" of a wall built well. Do you agree with this argument? Are there other poems in the volume that support the speaker's argument?

7. Home—finding one, keeping one—is an urgent matter in *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*, and we can approach the various speakers in Dungy's poems by ascertaining their relationship to home. How is home depicted in the poems "From Someplace," "Long Time Gone, Long Time Yet to Come," "Black Spoon," "We Were Two Rooms of One Timber, But I Left That Place Alone," "Fear," "The Preachers Eat Out," "Home Going," and "After Applying to Harvard, Colgate, Yale"?

8. In "Requiem," the idea of beauty is repeated over and over again, and the speaker of the poem asks us in the second stanza:

> Will you believe me when I tell you it was beautiful—
> my left leg turned to uselessness and my right shoe flung
> some distance down the road? Will you believe me
> when I tell you I had never been so in love
> with anyone as I was, then, with everyone I saw?

What are your answers to these questions? On a larger scale, what else are we being asked to believe about the speaker in the poem? What about the speaker is beautiful? What about the event in the poem is beautiful?

9. The antiphonal tradition, also known as "call and response," is one of the hallmarks of African American oral and literary traditions. To what extent do Dungy's poems make use of antiphony? Note, for example, that about one-half of the volume's poems include a question or series of questions necessitating answers. "What was the use of holding some body?" in "How Quickly He Went" is the first of many questions posed in the collection.

10. The blues has a bi-part structure: lament and catharsis, where catharsis does not necessarily mean resolution. That is, sometimes catharsis comes by virtue of registering a complaint; in this way, you survive even as you long to thrive. Arguably, "Pity," "Lament," "Sinner, don't you weep," and "Free Masons at the Door" are some of the poems in the volume that work according to a blues principle. Do you see evidence of the bi-part structure of the blues in these poems? Explain.

11. In the poems "Greyhound to Baton Rouge" and "Service Station, Tennessee," we confront explicit connections between race and the allocation of space. How often have you thought about the fact that what you look like may dictate where you can and cannot go? What other poems in the collection encourage us to reflect on this circumstance?

12. Change and seasonality are major considerations in *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*—especially in the title poem. How does the structure of the poem speak to both the change and continuity of life? What is the relationship between the title poem and others in the volume?

## Writer's Craft Guide for Camille Dungy's *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison*

*Written by Tara Powell, Assistant Professor of English and Southern Studies at the University of South Carolina at Columbia, where she teaches courses in contemporary American and regional literature and culture. Her essays and poems appear in a variety of journals, including Iron Mountain Review, Mississippi Quarterly, storySouth, and Weber Studies, among others.*

1. All forty-six of the poems that make up *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* might be said to be sonnets of one kind or another. Dungy calls them "rogue" sonnets. Do you recognize these poems as sonnets? What makes a sonnet run rogue? Drawing on specific

examples, identify some of the ways Dungy adheres to the conventions of the sonnet form, such as length, rhyme, meter, octaves and sestets, the volta, conceits, and so on, and then identify some of the ways she reinterprets these conventions. Why might a writer choose to write a rogue sonnet? Or, in this case, a whole book of them? How does Dungy's play with the conventions of such a traditional poetic form suit the overall thrust of her book?

2. Poets sometimes face different challenges than other types of writers when they start pulling together their books out of so many individual poems. One of Dungy's strategies in organizing her book is to begin the book with a stand-alone poem, then to divide the rest of the poems into three discrete, titled sections: "Under the Blue Flame…," "Swing Out on My Road…," and "Contraband." Then, each of those sections concludes with a single poem that is separated from the rest of the section by a page with a star on it and an additional blank page. Consider the sections and their titles individually, and then together. What holds them together? Is there a plot—or plots? A message? How do the titles fit in? What does the arrangement of these poems add to your understanding of the book, and how might a different organizational strategy have changed it? What do the beginning poem and the set-apart poems that conclude each section have in common, and why might Dungy have delineated them from the others in this way?

3. Plot and style help hold books together, but another strategy is the use of recurring images and ideas called motifs. A few of the motifs you may have recognized in Dungy's book include the use of dialogue, metaphors to do with language and words, the juxtaposition of sound and silence, nature imagery, flame, lynching, travel, music, parenting, and love. Trace one or more of these motifs through the book, or find another one on your own, and consider how the re-use of the idea or image in different poems complicates your understanding of the author's attitude toward it. Do some motifs hold the book together by meaning the same things each time they are used? Or do the nuances of the different contexts in which they are used bring them around to meaning something very different than where they began? How may the skillful repackaging of images or ideas help poems to converse with one another?

4. It is sometimes difficult to separate the speakers of poems from the author's own point-of-view and experiences. In this case, Dungy does draw on a good deal of autobiographical material for the raw stuff of her verse. When a writer draws on the literal truth of her own experiences, what complications and ethical challenges might she encounter? Have you ever written about your own life or people you are close to, only to worry about sharing what you've written with them later? Is it possible to be too true, or not true enough? What possibilities do Dungy's poems model for drawing effectively on autobiographical material? How may poets make

material from their own lives accessible and interesting to readers?

5. The role that region can play in a person's sense of her own identity inspires many poets, and Dungy is careful to root many of her poems in specific places. In fact, this author has lived at various times in the American West, Midwest, and South. In what ways can you see these places and regional experiences inspiring her poems? How would you describe Dungy's sense of place? What is your own sense of place, and how and why might you choose to communicate that in your poems?

6. Dungy's poems are not only beautifully made and intriguingly personal, but they are also full of ideas and comment both directly and indirectly on cultural issues of importance to the author, including what she sees as realities of gender and race in America. What does she tell us about these issues and others? Why do so many of the women in these poems pull back from male partners and seem unreachable? How might Dungy's reports of her family's stories about encountering racism be said to do political work? What other types of ideas can you identify in these poems? What tools does a poet have to comment on culture and politics that might set her apart from essayists, novelists, and other types of writers? Do you think communicating ideas is an important part of your own poetry? Why or why not?

7. One of the distinctive rhetorical strategies readers have identified in poetry by African Americans since the mid-twentieth century is the invocation of well-known black public figures through dedications, allusions, imagined monologues, and so on. In the second section of her book in particular, Dungy pays homage to this tradition. Think about what this strategy adds to the book and how the poems that contain these presences fit in with the others in the book. Why does Dungy juxtapose these poems about historical icons with poems that seem more explicitly personal, and how do the poems communicate with each other? Is there a community that you feel like you're a part of that has an impact on your work? Or individuals whom you may not know personally, but who inspire you all the same? How might you draw successfully on that sense of connection in your own work?

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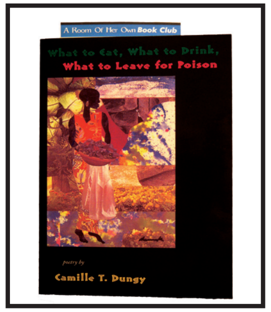

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