

## **Re-imagining the Past to Make a Future: Afrofuturism in Rita Dove's *Sonata Mulattica***

*Hala Darwish\**

Afrofuturism is a term that was first coined in 1994 by the cultural critic Mark Dery in his essay “Black to the Future.” As a rising twentieth century movement, Afrofuturism refers to the cultural production of writers, artists, musicians, and theorists who are African, African American, and diasporic Black. It describes music, art, and literature that includes elements of fantasy, magical realism, historical fiction, and Afro-centricity. Its literature, visual art, music, and theory imagine a greater future in alternative places, times, or realities with justice and a free expression of black subjectivity. Despite the fact that Afrofuturism as a movement has certainly thrived in recent years, especially since 2000, its intellectual and aesthetic grounds can be traced back to mid- and late-19th-century African American novels that offered imaginations of better alternative realities for black people. Afrofuturist writer and artist Ytasha Womack states that “Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (2013, 9). Afrofuturist ideas are used as concepts to share stories, resist oppression, and help build communities in need. Kodwo Eshun asserts that Afrofuturism revives “the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken” (2003, 288). Afrofuturism is an attempt to move away from Eurocentric views and to create a new world to restore the history of African peoples who have long been underrepresented and misrepresented.

Rita Frances Dove is an American poet and essayist who was the first African American to have been appointed Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress from 1993 to 1995. Her volume *Sonata Mulattica* (2009) is a mixture of genres and forms that narrate the hidden account of the real-life story of the biracial musician George Polgreen Bridgetower as fiction through the medium of poetry and a short play. Bridgetower was an Afro-Polish prodigy violinist who gave the first performance of Beethoven’s ninth violin sonata; unfortunately, he was intentionally erased from the musical world. By employing her imagination, Dove revives the story of the once promising talented musician who produced divine music, and yet was ultimately marginalized till he was forgotten. A close examination of Dove’s volume reveals how the process of re-imagining historical events and reimagining a black aesthetic can counter the erasure of the black race by creating a future that not

---

\* Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University  
*Cairo Studies in English* – 2024 (1): 40–57. <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>  
DOI: 10.21608/cse.2024.275807.1152

only brings them to the scene, but also transfers them into a level of refinement, hence creating a utopia for coming black generations and people of color.

Guided by the notions and concepts of Afrofuturism as a cultural aesthetic movement, the current study attempts to examine how Dove's volume bridges the past and the future by using past stories as well as the history of the Afro-diasporic Bridgetower. Dove reimagines the experience of people of color to create a better future. The paper will therefore use David Hume's and Immanuel Kant's theories of imagination, particularly focusing on the vital role that imagination plays in bringing history, fiction, and music together in *Sonata Mulattica*. Moreover, philosophical aesthetics will be utilized as part of the theoretical framework, in order to explicate the role of imagination in creating and in engaging with different types of artworks. Some of the most widely discussed roles of imagination are based on the works of Hume and Kant who invoke imagination in their exploration of aesthetic phenomena. The present study will focus on the role of imagination in engagement with the Arts and thinking creatively. For the last two centuries, imagination has been tackled by philosophers and philosophical aestheticians as well as literary critics. In their study on the theory of Imagination, Jürgen Klein et al. explain that imagination is a mental faculty common to all people to some degree as well as an important principle in literary theory. They highlight the immense importance of imagination "in everyday-life as well as in literary production and reception" With the Romantic shift from rationalist classicism towards subjectivism, there were several attempts to examine the concept of imagination and its theoretical reflections and speculations (1983, 1).

Any concept of literary imagination in western culture is founded on David Hume's and Immanuel Kant's philosophical investigations. According to Hume, imagination assures the continuity of natural processes in the outer world as human understanding has the ability to deal with causal probabilities. He proposes that human senses, reason, and imagination are the three factors that contribute to the continual existence of objects. However, senses are unreliable to form a coherent explanatory system because they are disjointed, sporadic, and are repeatedly interrupted. Moreover, reason, the second factor, is unreliable because it is the rational explanation that can be achieved by "common sense" which is variable and unpredictable, and therefore does not offer a philosophical analysis of the world. Hume then concludes that imagination is the conjunction between past and future (Klein 1983, 20). On Kant's account, imagination plays a central role in the creative process: "When imagination aims at the aesthetic, it is allowed to engage in free play beyond the understanding available to oneself. The unconstrained imagination can thereby take raw materials and produce outputs that transcend concepts that one possesses" (quoted in Liao 2020). Therefore, what makes a creative process creative is the involvement of imagination aiming at the aesthetic, hence the connection between imagination and creativity

Rita Dove, herself a musician, was fascinated when she saw a black violinist appear briefly on the screen in *Immortal Beloved* (1994), a film biography of Beethoven directed by Bernard Rose. This gave her what Mary Warnock describes in her definition of imagination: the "impression-idea" that "supplies us with ideas

to think about". The second element of imagination that Warnock discussed was the "memory which reproduces impressions so that we can think about things in their absence" (1976, 15). Throughout her work, Dove has taken the readers on a journey of reflection on past events mixed with hope and imagination of a restructured future. In order to achieve her target, Dove utilized her passion for history, her "expression of history is the most diverse in form and range of subject in contemporary American poetry" (Righelato 2008, 760). George Bridgetower, the original dedicatee of the "Kreutzer" Sonata, was a charismatic prodigy whose name was included in Anton Schindler's 1840 biography of Beethoven (Schindler 1996, 119). However, like so many Black artists prominent in their lifetimes, he has been largely forgotten by a history that belongs to those who control the narrative (Morrisroe 2020). Bridgetower was born in 1778 in Poland to a father of African descent and a German-Polish mother, making Bridgetower what was then known as a mulatto, a person of mixed race. In his article "New light on George Bridgetower," the historian William Hart writes that the circumstances surrounding the arrival of Frederick, Bridgetower's father, in Poland is unclear, but it is most likely that he may have been in the service of the Radziwill noble family. Soon Frederick moved to Austria with his wife and son, where he was known as "the Moor," and worked on as a page to Prince Nikolaus Esterházy. Being a music-lover, the prince maintained his own orchestra at his palace, where Haydn, the renowned Austrian musician was court composer (2017, 96). Bridgetower's father was the driving force behind his son's career. By the fall of 1789, Frederick had arranged for his son to play before King George III and Queen Charlotte, as well as the Prince of Wales, later George IV.

*Sonata Mulattica*, whether in form or content, is an invitation that readers enjoy the creative writing as well as explore the music of Beethoven's Sonata that is closely interwoven with the text.

Philosophic aestheticians have also done much to examine the common features between engagement with narratives and engagement with music. In the article "Listening with Imagination: Is Music Representational?" Kendall Lewis Walton, an authoritative figure within the tradition of analytical aesthetics, describes imagination in musical experience. He argues that "literary and pictorial representations establish fictional worlds. There is the world of a story and the world of a picture". He claims that music has fictional worlds that might be of a very different sort than the world of fiction. However, "One can always construct a world of the usual sort for a piece of music. One can, if one wants to...tell stories to go with them-stories ..., or whatever one allows the music to suggest". Visual and literary representations establish fictional worlds by virtue of their role in our imaginative lives. Music also induces imaginings. Music engages our imagination in a way that can be "spontaneous, non-deliberate, a passive experience rather than something one does" (1994, 48). Expressive music "suggests or portrays or somehow recalls expressive human behavior, behavior by means of which human beings express exuberance or anguish or gaiety or agitation or serenity or anger or timidity or boldness or aggressiveness" (50). This makes the music figurative, as

literature, therefore, the same kind of imagination used in experiencing narratives is also used in experiencing various elements of music, such as imagining continuity between movements and imagining feelings of musical tension. Thus, it can be claimed that imagination plays an essential role in the creation and appreciation of both the music in Beethoven's "The Keurtzer Sonata" and Rita Dove's *Sonata Mulattica*.

Beethoven originally wrote the sonata for George Polgreen Bridgetower, a talented mixed-race violinist whom he had not yet personally met, but whose playing impressed him in early 1803. Almost more than two centuries later, Dove, herself a musician, had a natural interest in music, and she was intrigued when she saw a black violinist appear briefly on the screen in *Immortal Beloved* (1994), a film biography of Beethoven. The title of the film that inspired her immortalizes Beethoven, but when she started investigating Bridgetower's life, she produced *Sonata Mulattica* that immortalizes Bridgetower, hence, ironically, he becomes the immortal beloved. Beethoven's work comes in three movements: the first, Presto, in A minor is in sonata form and is preceded by a slow introduction, Adagio Sostenuto - a dramatic technique used to build tension before the movement begins. The second, Andante con Variazioni, is a theme and variations with a coda. The last movement, Presto, is in the character of an Italian tarantella, with its development in sonata form. Beethoven tied all the movements together by using the same motives and thematic material throughout the entire work thus creating a unified whole (Pepelea 2015, 70). Similarly, Dove covers the events of Bridgetower's career in the five movements associated with such compositions. These include: An introduction, the exposition of the themes, an elaboration and development of those themes, a recapitulation that resolves them, and a coda.

The two poems in the Prologues set the scene for the narrative that Dove intends to relate. In the first poem "The Bridgetower," Dove's passion for history led her to investigate Bridgetower's life and to record it in her sonata. After a long search, Dove found the story of the prodigy who had inspired Beethoven:

...In 1803

George Polgreen Bridgetower,  
son of Friederich Augustus the African Prince  
and Maria Anna Sovinki of Biala in Poland,  
traveled from London to Vienna  
where he met the Great Master  
who would stop work on his Third Symphony  
to write a sonata for his new friend  
to premiere triumphantly on May 24. (19)

At one point, Bridgetower surprised Beethoven by imitating and then expanding on a short piano cadenza in the first movement. Beethoven, jumping up, hugged him, crying, "My dear boy! Once more!" (Morrisroe 2020). A magnificent assembly gathered to attend the performance which was a triumph:

whereupon the composer himself  
leapt up from the piano to embrace  
his “lunatic mulatto.” (20)

In her Afrofuturist text, Dove tackles past issues of racial discrepancies and social injustices committed against black people by using her imagination to place them in a futuristic landscape. It is her imagination that lets one move from counterfactual antecedents, thus expressing what has not happened but could, would, or might if things had been different from how they in fact are. Timothy Williamson argues: “Obviously, the use of the imagination in evaluating counterfactuals would generally be useless if it were not disciplined by background knowledge” (2005, 19). Dove is using historical facts, real characters, places, and incidents complemented with an imagination with fiction which had never happened:

Who knows what would have followed?  
They might have palled around some,  
just a couple of wild and crazy guys  
strutting the town like rock stars,  
hitting the bars for a few beers, a few laughs . . .  
instead of falling out over a girl  
nobody remembers, nobody knows.  
... they might play the impossible:  
Beethoven’s Sonata no. 9 in A Major, op. 47,  
also known as The Bridgetower. (19-20)

To create an imagined black future derived from past Afro-diasporic experiences, the poet raises a series of questions in the prologue in order to engage the readers in this subjective process of imagination which results in different possible and imagined scenarios. By means of imagination as a faculty, both the author and the reader are able to deal with, evaluate, and enjoy literature. Therefore they can see the literary or possible world in reference to their personal realities as well as perform a transition between possibility and reality (Klein 1983, 23). In *Sonata Mulattica*, the poet’s imagination offers the possibility of diverse inner experiences that took place in the life of the characters; eventually, the readers’ imagination will enable them to create a possible escape from the unjust past to a fair, unprejudiced future.

The second poem, “Prologue of the Rambling Sort,” introduces the other characters in the narrative and promises, playfully, to “leave out the boring parts” as an implication to prepare the readers that all the forthcoming details are of significance and interest.

This is a tale of light and shadow,  
What we hear and the silence that follows.  
Remember this as we set...  
So it is a lost story,  
but we will be imagining it, anyway.

...

The major players:  
Father and son, son and father.  
...till the end. (21)

All the referenced characters are real, as Dove has clearly stated in the Preface. They are the father, the son, Prince of Wales, Assistant keeper of the Wardrobe to the Queen, a famed chef, a fiddling beggar, and others. The poet introduces the characters and describes the scene where her narrative is set. She reminds the readers that “it is a lost story,/ but we will be imagining it, anyway” (21). It is obligatory that the readers join in this task of restoring the lost story. The creation of possible multicolored worlds is the product of the individual imagination, which is always subjective on the issues the author wants to name. The writer sometimes needs to invent additional effects that could be identified by reference to temporality in the sense that literary texts must take into account the relationship between the text-world on one side and past and future on the other (Klein 1983, 22-23). Setting the scene and preparing the readers for the task, Dove states: “That’s how we’ll be travelling—and the rest, / as they say, is background music. / (Ah, but what heavenly music *that* was...)” (23). Music is accompanying the reader on this imaginative journey in the life story and the imagined part of a created world of the mulatto Bridgetower.

The first movement of the collection titled “The Prodigy” is the exposition that focuses on Bridgetower’s life as a child in the Esterházy court hinting at his musical talent, and how his father delightedly turns the child over to the composer. The poems in this movement trace Bridgetower’s growing talent, dramatizing the young boy’s impressive musical performances in France and England. Frederick had skillfully managed his son’s career; when he was 11 George was introduced in London with a Giornovich concerto between the first two parts of Handel’s “Messiah.” On June 2, 1790, the Prince of Wales, who organized regular chamber concerts, sponsored a benefit concert for Bridgetower and another young artist at the Hanover Square Rooms, the highest concert venue for elite society (Morrisroe 2020). According to Charlotte Papendiek (1887), a lady-in-waiting to Queen Charlotte and a prolific journal keeper, the Prince of Wales took 12-year-old George under his protection and gave him the opportunity to learn musical composition, theory, and piano from the finest musicians in London. He established a close relationship with Giovanni Battista Viotti, Italian violinist and composer and principal founder of the 19th-century school of violin playing whose confident, daring style had an impact on George’s. The next decade witnessed Bridgetower performing with leading

orchestras and musicians, including Haydn and the double-bass virtuoso Domenico Dragonetti in nearly 50 public concerts.

The poem "Recollection, Preempted" takes the reader through Bridgetower's journey from his flourishing talent to successful performances and finally fall from grace. As the title indicates, it is a journey of recollecting sweet memories to anticipating his downfall. The poem is in the boy's voice that recalls his time there and indicates his passion for the music he had learned. He remembers "crickets, hidden, singing from the green globes of shrubbery" (33). Furthermore, he vividly recalls "teams of servants lighting jars of black tallow/ along the palace steps, all to make/ a starry bridge/ at nightfall/ when the guests arrived for one of Papa's amusements-- / ceaseless operas, human and marionette: inconsequential music, even to a boy's ears..."(33-34). One of his early significant childhood memories is that of his hiding place:

(The puppet theater  
Was my favorite hiding place:  
Dark but glimmering,  
A cave inside  
A treasure chest.  
I sang to myself.  
It was like being buried  
In jewels). (34)

The 'puppet' theatre being his favorite hiding place highlights the fact that he was manipulated by the powerful/ white/rich..., hence he is the 'Other' ever since his innocent childhood years. However, his downfall is anticipated by 'being buried,' ironically 'in jewels.' His budding talent appears at an early age; he enjoys the music with the 'witchery' effects of its 'orchestral strings' that gathers him like a mother's bosom a symbol of love and protection. However, this very same music is what gives him the 'stinging embrace' (34).

The diary genre -- presented by Mrs. Papendiek's four diary entries in the volume is an objective narrator-witness that gives the reader authentic details about the young violinist's talent and how he was well received by the audiences despite his skin color-- that she takes note of. In "Mrs. Papendiek's Diary (1)," she gives a detailed first-hand account of the luxurious preparations, and describes her first encounter with Bridgetower, describing him as "a lad of ten or twelve, / bore a hue that seemed cast in darkest bronze; / he was smartly dressed, possessed an admirable restraint, and played the Viotti Concerto with an eloquence and refinement" (41). Bridgetower possessed an extreme desire to succeed, and more importantly, to be accepted despite his race. Mrs. Papendiek also adds more details of various incidents like the flattering compliments presented by George's father "the Moor" on her "yellow Indian muslin" (42). The combination of first-hand information from reliable narrators together with the existence of realistic characters have provided

material for the poet and the readers to visualize a lively picture of the prodigy's life and reimagine a better world for the whole race.

According to Alondra Nelson, a sociologist and an Afrofuturist scholar, Afrofuturism is a method of addressing discussions about race, identity, alienation, and the aspirations of the black community in a utopic future. Frederick is portrayed as handsome, charming, and fluent in multiple languages. Being an attractive natural storyteller with a flair for promotion, he claimed that his father had been an African prince unofficially adopted by a Dutch sea captain, was promised diamonds and gold dust, and then sold into slavery, surviving a shipwreck in the process. The father married an African woman and wound up in Barbados, where Frederick was born, the name Bridgetower was likely derived from the island's capital, Bridgetown. To add to his enigmatic air, Frederick wore oriental-inspired clothing and flowing Turkish robes; everyone wanted to meet Frederick, the "African prince" and his prodigy, George (45-6). In "The Wardrobe Lesson," Frederick speaks of English assumptions about Africans' love of color, illustrating his deep understanding of the society he is living in and his position in it. Therefore, Frederick's skills and talents significantly contributed to bringing fame to his son as well as the whole race.

Dove's second and third movements are the exposition of the themes, the most relevant to the present study is the underlying theme of racism. The imagining continues and the musical tension is heightened in the second movement that starts with Samuel Johnson's words: "You find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave London. No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford" (quoted in Dove 2009, 53). This summarizes and foreshadows Bridgetower's moving from London, the peak of his prominence to Vienna, where he meets Beethoven who will erase his name and fame. Activists and writers, like Dove, find it necessary to embrace Afrofuturism as a revolutionary concept for several reasons: it subverts traditional views of African cultures, it intertwines past and future, and offers representations of the misrepresented and the unrepresented. The title of the poem "Black Pearl" is an Afrofuturist attempt of bringing black people to the white world; it examines the presence of Africans in London in 1790. The very first line of the poem: "Pathological hit of the day: nigger on a golden chain" (59) is shocking as it defies the conventional and indicates that Bridgetower himself was the 'nigger,' a taboo word; he is an ultimate outsider who is enslaved by 'golden chains.' The other characters in the narrative like Joseph Haydn was little more than a servant to the powerful Esterházy family. Bridgetower's father, though a man of great social skills who had portrayed himself as a prince in the white world, was no more than a graceful curiosity to the family he served, as an African. Nonetheless, he continues to assert himself and to create a place for himself and eventually for his son.

The poem "The Dressing" is *Father's aside* (72) where Bridgetower's father who is often referred to as a "Moor" claims that he is "so large/ they cannot grasp my meaning"(72). He makes use of white society's view of him and his race to his own advantage:

Since in their eyes I have no culture,  
I am free to borrow strange adornments:  
The Ottoman Sultan's quilted turban  
A French phrase, Caesar's cape  
Flung hyperbolically across Africa's  
Gaily layered robes. In this way  
I have made from their lust a business. (73)

His aim is not only to find himself a place and reputation, but more importantly to pass it on to his son whom he urges to be proud of himself, his true genuine self and not the one they want to shape and manipulate:

I would give up my small empire  
To you, my son, but not ever  
Must you forget that you are, indeed,  
A Prince—just not the pitiable one  
They worship here, not just the one  
They can see. (73)

The magnifications of fakery in the poem are followed by a life lesson to his son to live according to his own values and standards rather than European ones. The counterpoint poem "The Undressing" is in the form of a monologue uncovering Bridgetower's inner soul where he questions his self-pride. The poem is a moment of transformation when he was "to become a proper British/ gentleman: cuffed and buckled/ with breeches and a fine cravat" (73). This sense of confinement escalates as he grows burdened with wastefulness until he feels that he is heavily laden and ending in "smudge, / a quenched wick, / a twig shrouded in snow" (80). The two contrasting poems portray the different attitudes of the father who claims a significant place in society, while the son suffers a sense of imprisonment and is manipulated by the rich and powerful.

The third "movement" of Bridgetower's life, titled "Sturm und Drang" (storm and stress) is a development of the plot towards the climax and further elaboration of the themes. In this movement, Bridgetower meets Beethoven at a time when the famous composer was experiencing encroaching deafness. Struggling with his hearing impairment, Beethoven was deeply impressed by Bridgetower's virtuosity and composed a sonata just for him – his Violin Sonata No. 9 in A major, Op. 47. It is a sonata for the piano and violin notable for its technical difficulty, unusual length, and emotional scope. In "Vienna Spring," Beethoven describes Bridgetower: "A lunatic angel has descended on Vienna!" renewing his faith in the violin, which he had previously renounced as "a tiny querulous beast" (111) fit only for peg-legged street musicians. Beethoven admits: "I fear I must revise my former assessment" for Bridgetower has proved to be:

...Entirely master  
of his instrument, he climbs the strings  
agile as the monkeys from his father's land.  
Ah, Immortality has a new-wrought,  
human face. (111-112)

Despite Beethoven's acknowledgement of the young violinist virtuoso, he compares his outstanding skills and talents to the agile movements of monkeys from his father's land, a very explicit reference to his black African ancestors. It is obvious that he is never referred to without an explicit or even a subtle insinuation at his mixed race, clearly connoting an inferior position. Bridgetower's brilliance was expressed in the poem "Polgreen, Sight Reading" as he performs the impossible sonata. Bridgetower was sight-reading because they took the stage for the concert, without previously rehearsing the piece. Beethoven had given Bridgetower an opening solo that began with an explosive declaration, moving into a fiery, sensual dialogue. In 1803, he wrote that he had barely finished it by the first performance, and so George had to read his part over Beethoven's shoulder as he played at the piano. He even changed some parts, which he gratefully admitted he improved. After the performance, he presented him with a gift – a tuning fork – as a token of his admiration. The poem is Bridgetower's interior monologue where he voices his ability to grasp the feelings and thoughts of Beethoven who though was enigmatic to him at first, but surprisingly, the young violinist was able to learn about the workings of the composer's mind and heart.

Harder to play long  
than fast. It's more than stretching  
a line-- suspension is  
what we yearn for,  
that delicate fulcrum between crash and sheer evaporation ... (113)

Bridgetower proclaims the difficulty involved in the sonata

He frightens me. I've never heard music  
like this man's, this sobbing  
in the midst of triumphal chords,  
such ambrosial anguish,  
jigs danced on simmering coal.  
oh, I can play it well enough-hell,  
I've been destined to travel these impossible  
switchbacks, it's as if I am skating  
on his heart, blood tracks  
looping everywhere, incarnadine  
dips and curves  
I am not making sense. (114)

The black prodigy was able to intimately engage with society, deftly stepping on to the stage to perform the most challenging symphony. However, in “The Performer,” Bridgetower declares his position in the world of music. The poem “The Performer” is chronicled by Bridgetower himself voicing his awareness that his musical talent enables him to step out into “silence” and to take his place on stage where the language of music dominates:

I step out.  
I step out into silence.  
I step out to take  
My place; my place is silence  
Before I lift the bow and draw  
A finger width of ache upon the air.  
This is what it is like  
To be a flame: furious  
But without weight, breeze  
Sharpening into wind, a bright gust  
That will blind, flatten all of you- (119).

The music that he plays on stage amid all the silence echoes his inner pain and suffering. This is followed by a reflection on past memories of the struggle between himself and “the master” Beethoven over “Wien,” an empress. Bridgetower tries to apologize, explaining that he “only meant that she is --- magnificent” (120), but in vain. Having lost the support of Beethoven, the *Finale of the poem* is a search for self; Bridgetower is imagining the counterfactuals; he wishes to be accepted as a human: “if this world could stop/ for a moment/ and see me” (121). He is longing to be seen and recognized in a society that views him as an outcast:

If I could step out  
Into the street and become  
One of them,  
One of anything,  
I would sing-  
No weep right here – to simply  
Be and be and be--- (121).

His search for identity and the desire to belong and be accepted in society reveals his inner power to rise again just like the immortal phoenix despite the ill-treatment. This is a declaration of his own independent powers and abilities. Although Bridgetower is best remembered today for his association with Ludwig van Beethoven, it is worth noting here that:

George Bridgetower, the African prodigy, had a most active concert career in England from 1789 to 1799, and that a reappraisal of his position in the records

of music in Britain is long overdue. His fame and recognition as an accomplished musician were established during his youth in London, well before his brief encounter with Beethoven in Vienna during April-May, 1803. (Wright 1980, 81)

When he arrived he was already an established violinist, having been employed by the Prince of Wales (later George IV), and a polyglot who was fluent in English, German, French, Italian, and Polish. Thus, his debut in the history of Western music was not solely due to his encounter with Beethoven.

The main reason behind the quarrel between the two is not entirely clear for there were several scenarios; however, the most likely story is the fight over a girl. In a note from Beethoven, he wrote that Bridgetower dared to insult a woman whom he knew Beethoven loved (Peckham 2020). Dove employs her faculty of creative imagination to dramatize the incident that has probably taken place. Stokes, who follows in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant, claims that imagination, when used to aesthetic ends, provides a free play of ideas, a “wealth of undeveloped material for the understanding” (2014, 157). He explains that imagination enjoys an endless scope of freedom that “One can imagine situations that have not and will never happen. One can imagine the truth of propositions of which one is uncertain. One can imagine consequences to an action before performing it” (158). This cognitive play is important if not essential to creative art making. This is simply because creative things are, in part, new things: sometimes new combinations of old things, combinations of concepts, ideas, or knowledge. Or stronger, creativity may involve thoughts or actions that are radically novel, not merely conceptual combinations of existing materials (Boden 2004).

After the third movement, Dove interrupts the structure of her poetic narrative by a unique Volkstheater “Short Play for the Common Man” at the centre of the book to dramatize the crisis between Bridgetower and Beethoven, a crisis which has always remained enigmatic. Dove titles the play *Georgie Porgie, or A Moor in Vienna*. She heads it with a “Cast of Characters (& I mean characters!)” that includes Bridgetower and Beethoven, his copyist, a barmaid, and “a chorus of bad girls.” The title of the play aligns with the romantic imagination. The play is for ‘the Common Man’ about a ‘Moor in Vienna’ and the characters are everyday individuals. Jillian Wriston explains that Dove’s choice of the form Volkstheater enabled her “to accomplish many aims: she slows down time, amplifies the tension by using real drama, and exercises vulgar dialogue that we all wish we could have heard Beethoven and Bridgetower use. The variety in form throughout the book helps to keep the material fresh, and allows the reader to approach it from different angles” (2013, 2).

The first scenes of the play present the enmity between the director of the Augarten concerts and the copyist against Bridgetower. They consider him an intruder who has occupied their place in Beethoven’s attention. Bridgetower responds to their stereotypes by doing some fraternity stepping: “(*He does a little fraternity stepping. The others relax, visibly relieved: This is how he is supposed to*

act) (127). The rising action of the play takes place in a later scene at the Prater, an amusement park when Bridgetower flirts with a barmaid whom Beethoven had admired. When she agrees to meet Bridgetower later that night, Beethoven is infuriated and calls him a disgrace for insulting the girl. In an attempt to remedy the situation, Bridgetower reminds him: “We’re just having a little fun” (137), however Beethoven refers to Bridgetower as a “heathen” and a “savage” thus describing him as the classical stereotype of the Negro Savage; another opportunity to highlight his inferior place in society and to justify that though he is of mixed race, the improper behaviour is due to the African part of his identity. This fall-out between the two is a turning point that Beethoven punished him by ripping the dedication of his Sonata: “Mulatto Sonata, composed/ for the mulatto Bridgetower, / great lunatic and mulatto composer,” thereby making the young violinist insignificant. Then he rededicated this sonata to violinist Rudolphe Kreutzer.

The falling actions where the themes are resolved take place in the fourth movement “All is Ashes,” a title implying total destruction as nothing is left but ruins. Already reduced to memories/ ashes by Beethoven’s act, Bridgetower bitterly leaves Vienna while Beethoven proceeds with more successful compositions. This end of the friendship between the two highlights how black people can be destroyed, erased from history and turned into nothing but ashes. By examining concepts of race, Dery (1994) raises the following question: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately erased imagine possible futures?” The answer to this question can be deduced from Dove’s Afrofuturist work that does not only reveal the intensified injustices, but also imagines new black identities in an ideal futuristic space. Enjoying the patronage and friendship of George, Prince of Wales, later George IV of England (1762-1830), Bridgetower returned to London and continued to perform. The poem “Esterháza, Prodigal” records his return to the court, his starting point where Haydn gave him his first lessons. Bridgetower holds on by recollecting pleasant memories from his childhood:

The puppet theatre was my favorite  
hiding place, dark and glimmering,  
a cave inside  
a treasure chest. I sang to myself.  
It was like being buried in jewels. (146)

Being a puppet in the hands of the powerful rich highlights racism, a theme that Afrofuturist works attempt to defy. Bridgetower, like many black artists, was manipulated by those in power who have once recognized him as eminent and now decided - for sheer personal prejudices and biases- to deprive him of his dream of fame and erase him from music history.

The title of the poem *Eroica* echoes Beethoven’s *Eroica Symphony*, his largest solely instrumental work which premiered in Vienna in 1805. It was grander and more dramatic than customary for symphonies at the time for its supposed heroic

nature. It was written in admiration of Bonaparte's efforts to reform society and empower the working classes to enjoy more equality that he called it the *Bonaparte Symphony*. When Napoleon named himself Emperor of France, Beethoven was infuriated that his hero had become a tyrant "who will think himself superior to all men," (Schwarm 2023) hence, he tore the title page from the symphony and cancelled the French tour. Following this, the symphony had a new sub-title: *Eroica*, indicating the general concept of heroism rather than referring to the specific deeds of Bonaparte. The poem records the unique harmony between the two as revealed in their performances. In an act of heroism, Beethoven is reflecting and admitting how he would not have performed without Bridgetower who was his ears, soul and inspiration:

So that I could read his playing, see my score  
Transcribed on the air, on the breeze- I breathed  
His soul through my fingers and gave up  
Trying to listen; I watched him and felt  
The music- it was better than listening,  
It was the last pure sound... (151)

Despite the praise and appreciation of Bridgetower's talent, once his anger is aroused because of Bridgetower's remark at the girl, he tore the page of the dedication. He describes Bridgetower as a savage, but soon an air of regret and sense of guilt overtook Beethoven manifested in the following questions:

Why did that savage say it? Why did I hear  
What he said, why did I mind what I heard?  
Good days, bad days, screech and whistle:  
Sometimes I lay my head on the piano  
To feel the wood breathing, the ivory sigh. (151)

This incident was followed by loss and damage for both sides: Bridgetower lost his dream and his fame in the world of music, whereas Beethoven lost his hearing and his dear friend. Even Bridgetower's return to the orchestra of the Prince in London is a submission to service, where he is being manipulated by the rich and the powerful, merely working for the pleasure of others.

The fifth and concluding section "Nomadia" carries the epigraph "Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then would I fly away and be at rest" (Psalms 55:6). This movement is the coda which is a typical end of a sonata movement that is generally based on extensions or re-elaborations of thematic material previously heard, namely, the issue of race. It recounts the end of Bridgetower's career focusing on the later years. In the poem "Moor with Emeralds" Bridgetower has learned the lesson: "I am here to serve. I await/ a word- any word!" (176). After several incidents, he is now aware that his colour will place him in a submissive position in society:

You may think me a mere charcoal coolie,  
Yet I bear such beautiful redundance!  
I am its jubilant Negro

----

For I have  
been waiting all my Life to step into  
this Moment, your Moment,  
arms full. (177)

Bridgetower has become the “most/ humble/ obedient/ exuberant/ servant” (177) who is willing to sacrifice his personal happiness and glory for the sake of others. His isolation from society is voiced in the poem "Birthday Stroll on the Pall Mall" where he expresses his vulnerability and increasing interior bitterness caused by “...a man I loved, /who like a father loved me” (185), but he "ripped my life-- my legacy!-- in two"(185) for an argument over a woman. There is an obvious insinuation at the ephemeral nature of power and fame as he tells the reader of Beethoven's downfall:

He is deaf now, he hears nothing  
Of the fractured existence.  
I would tell him (if he would see me)  
There is no hero  
Who does not fall from grace. (186)

The prodigy's journey from rise to fall is summarized in the poem “Instrumental” where the incidents of the narrative are interwoven with the movement of musical components. After the unprecedented talent and the patronage and admiration that Bridgetower had received, nothing remains except:

A stick  
A string  
A bow.  
The twang  
As the arrow  
Leaves it. (207)

The musical “bow” that was expected to bring him fame and glory has become a double-edged weapon: it is used as a cross bow for Bridgetower's destruction, a punishment for a reckless comment, and a painful lesson learned about the transience of power, fame, and life in general. What remains is “the breach/ no one sees/shivering/struck” (207). Even though Bridgetower has been in oblivion for a long time, the awareness that was raised by advocates of Afrofuturism revived his life story, tackled the injustice done to people of color, and highlighted the outstanding artistic talents, henceforth igniting a spark of hope for a utopic future for

the blacks. All through the volume Dove has deftly sketched an elaborate life for Bridgetower, a life that elaborately described not only who he was, but also how he felt being a mulatto prodigy in Europe at his time. However, in the last poem “The End, with MapQuest,” Dove maintains her distance from Bridgetower and raises a series of questions in an attempt to define her relationship with him:

Will I cry for your Polgreen? Will I drag out your end

....

Do I care enough, George Augustus Bridgetower,  
To miss you? I don't even know if I really like you. (208)

This aesthetic distance that she has created added to the objectivity and credibility of the narrative. She wonders if his music was really phenomenal or if the people were simply attracted to watch “That darkness swaying close enough to touch, /palm tree and Sambo and glistening tiger/running circles into golden oil” (208). Her final painful, but thought-provoking question “Ah, Master B, little great man, tell me:/How does a shadow shine?” (208) is a variation on Dery’s question: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately erased imagine possible futures?” Both questions are answered by Dove’s creative imagination that brought the long-forgotten prodigy to light in *Sonata Mulattica*.

To sum up, Bridgetower was not the only talented, classically trained musician of African ancestry active in England at that time. Nevertheless, the unwavering financial support of the nobility and the patronage and friendship of George, Prince of Wales endowed him with a privileged position which was in sharp contrast with most Afro-Europeans who lived in Georgian society, notwithstanding their position as free men. Throughout her volume of poetry, Dove has embarked on a journey where she chronicled the life story of the prodigy Bridgetower through a harmonious mixture of facts and fiction and history and imagination that the readers become fully engaged and absorbed in the narrative, travelling through the alternating foregrounding and backgrounding of the events and the music. Both the volume of poetry and the symphony revolve around the very same prodigy Bridgetower; as Beethoven’s piece manifested his exceptional virtuosity.

While the musician’s anger meant to send him to oblivion and was eventually forgotten by the classical music world, Dove’s use of Afrofuturist notions and creative imagination brought him strongly to light. Dove focuses on the fact that Bridgetower was a prodigy with a unique talent who managed to make the best use of a gift that simultaneously liberated and imprisoned him. While the volume does not celebrate the return of a reinstated prince, there were several moments of victory that the poetry recorded, but his victory was transient. *Sonata Mulattica* brought fame to Bridgetower in the world of music that it is produced in modern times as a documentary film based on elements from Dove's book that match parts of Bridgetower's life with that of contemporary black musician and composer Joshua Coyne (b.1993). The process of re-imagining historical events and black Afrofuturist aesthetics free the black race from the threat of erasure by creating a utopic world

for the coming generations of Africans and people of color; a future that would do them justice and provide a utopia where their identity and talents are appreciated.

## References

- Boden, Margaret A. 2004. *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*. London: Routledge.
- Dery, Mark. 1994. "Black to the Future." *Afro-Future Females*: 6. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Dove, Rita. 2010. *Sonata Mulattica: Poems*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Eshun, Kodwo. 2003. "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2: 287-302.
- Hart, William. 2017. "New light on George Bridgetower." *The Musical Times* 158, no. 1940: 95-106.
- Klein, Jürgen, Vera Damm, and Angelika Giebeler. 1983. "An Outline of a Theory of Imagination." *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 14:15-23.
- Liao, Shen-yi and Tamar Gendler. 2020 "Imagination". *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Summer 2020 Edition, Edward N. Zalta ed. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/imagination/#Natulmag>.
- Morrisroe, Patricia. 2020. "The Black Violinist Who Inspired Beethoven." *International New York Times*.
- Papendiek, Charlotte Louise Henrietta. 1887. *Court and Private Life in the Time of Queen Charlotte: Being the journals of Mrs. Papendiek, Assistant Keeper of the Wardrobe and Reader to Her Majesty*. Vol. 1. London: R. Bentley & son.
- Peckham Society. 2020. "George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower (1778-1860)." *Peckham Society News*, no. 161 (Summer). <https://www.pechamsociety.org.uk/?p=2602>.
- Pepelea, Dan. 2015 "Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata No. 9 for Piano and Violin in A Major, Op. 47." *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, Series VIII: Performing Arts* 8, no. 2: 69-76.
- Righelato, Pat. 2008. "Rita Dove and the Art of History." *Callaloo* 31, no. 3: 760-775.
- Rose, Bernard, director. 1994. *Immortal Beloved*. Columbia Pictures.
- Schindler, Anton, and Donald W. MacArdle. 1996. *Beethoven as I knew him*. New York: Dover Publication.
- Schwarm, B. "Eroica Symphony." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 20, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eroica-Symphony>.
- Stokes, Dustin. 2014. "The Role of Imagination in Creativity." *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, edited by Elliot S. Paul, and Scott B. Koufman, 157-184.
- Walton, Kendall. 1994. "Listening with imagination: Is music representational?." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 1: 47-61.
- Warnock, Mary. 1976. *Imagination*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Williamson, Timothy. 2005. "The Presidential Address: Armchair Philosophy, Metaphysical Modality and Counterfactual Thinking" In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105, no. 1, 1-23. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Womack, Ytasha L. 2013. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
- Wright, Josephine R. B. 1980. "George Polgreen Bridgetower: An African Prodigy in England 1789-99." *The Musical Quarterly* 66, no. 1: 65–82.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/742137>.
- Wriston, Jillian. 2013. "Sonata Mulattica: Rita Dove's Juggling Act."  
<http://www.poetsquarterly.com/2013/07/sonata-mulattica-rita-doves-jugglingact.html>. Retrieved Feb 1, 2014.