**Poet’s Corner**

**by Carol Muske-Dukes

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**American Smooth**
**Rita Dove**

**W.W. Norton: 144 pp., $22.95**According to Rita Dove’s informal glossary, “American Smooth” is a reference to a type of ballroom dancing derived from traditional “standard” dances like the waltz or the tango in which partners are “released” to dance freely. In this collection – which relies on a kindred art to “choreograph” its expression – we find poems proceeding in stately cadence, then sliding into fox trot, cha-cha, mambo, rumba.

One, two – *no, five doves
scatter before a wingtip’s
distracted tread.*What is being foregrounded by this nimble-footed choreography? Dance itself, the idea of dance – but also dance’s negotiation between what is perceived and enacted both within and against tradition. Dance becomes a metaphor for change, though it appears to confine itself to careful “steps.” Beneath the surface of these breezy, unself-conscious poems, there are startling “improvisations”:

*The difference between a moan and a hallelujah
ain’t much of a slide.*Dove has always been concerned with questions of history, race and culture. These poems are no exception. Hattie McDaniel (the first African American performer to win an Academy Award), the famous (segregated) 369th African American regiment in World War I and a meditation on the American justice system brush shoulders with lighthearted ripples like “Samba Summer”:

*That skirt’s too yellow
and far too tight
for any Christian child.*Other poems about war’s terrors and a family’s drive through a minefield emphasize the importance of sure-footedness combined with right-mindedness.

*You didn’t want us when we left but we went.
You didn’t want us coming back but here we are
stepping right up white-faced Fifth Avenue in a phalanx.*

This is a stunning book by our Pulitzer Prize-winning former poet laureate. It seems American to “re-make” oneself as an artist, but Rita Dove manages it gracefully, effortlessly, with “American Smooth.”