



The Complex Between Art, History, and Power: Contemporary East African Interpretations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*



Sephora Affa, Florida State University. Dr. Elizabeth Coggeshall, Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics, College of Arts and Sciences

INTRODUCTION

- Topic of interest came up while posting for *Dante Today*, led by Dr. Elizabeth Coggeshall and Dr. Arielle Saber.
- Viewing global connections to *The Divine Comedy* led to a specific look at East African Dante references in art, literature, and events, due to their colonial history with Italy.
- This relationship transcends the examinations of “positive” and “negative” effects.
- Example: teaching Italian in Eritrean schools as essential experience, despite colonial history.
- Initial questioning process motivated by ideas: “universal themes” and “post-colonialism.”
- Questions arose about the validity of the above terms.
- It became clearer that the goal was not to reach an objective conclusion, rather, to explore and reach into the realm of ideas not written about in order to further elaborate on other projects.
- This is still in the exploratory stages.

ABSTRACT

- Italian colonialism led to direct cross-cultural interactions between Italy and Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, and Ethiopia.
- There emerges a complex relationship between art, history, and power.
- Global dispersion of the *Divine Comedy* lends itself to this relationship.
- Do post-colonial East African *Commedia* references reveal anything about the tension between thematic reception and colonialism's impact?
- To answer this question, the project will study existing artifacts that reference Dante's *Commedia*, examining the relevance, implications, and responses around its themes.
- Overall: Does Dante's reception in East Africa manifest itself through new artworks that synergize Dante's themes with colonialism, or does colonialism even play a significant role in these new interpretations?

METHOD OF COLLECTION

- Initial questioning: is there a relationship between art, history, and power?
- Collection of two types of references:
 - 1) Direct East-African references to Dante (literature, book reviews, visual art, events)
 - 2) Research articles that pose an assertion on important themes, such as “post-colonialist” criticism
- As these articles were read, intriguing key points were written down on flashcards (see chart).
- Collection of flashcards organized under a plethora of key connections (see chart key).
- The connections lent themselves to more questions, rather than conclusions.
- The collection method is cyclical rather than linear.
- Focus on collecting, connecting, and questioning.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

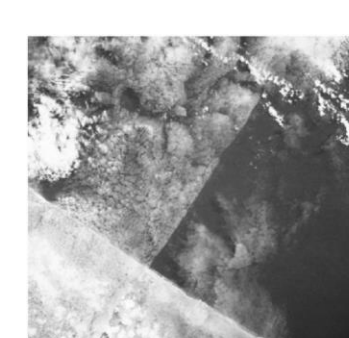
- Resulting takeaways are visible as connections and questions, as seen on the chart on the left.
- Most recurring idea: through a limiting post-colonial lens, contemporary East-African artists and authors reclaim power through individual examination, unraveling Dante from the manipulations he has been put through to justify colonialism.
- The manipulation and reclamation of an author deals closely with power dynamics and ownership, which will be continued.
- Potential future direction: a specific look at the history between colonialist analysis and psychoanalysis (Fanon, Cesaire, Memmi) and a delve into attachment theory.
- Limitation: timeframe
 - Plans to 1) gain a better understanding of East African history and literary history 2) Read closer into *La Commedia* 3) find more artifacts
- Limitation: Difficulty forming a concrete conclusion
 - It seems counterintuitive to make a sweeping conclusion based on a collection of individual art pieces. In addition, the limitations of a solely post-colonial lens leads to an excess of questioning and examining, however, is fruitful in that it leads to a multi-directional, ever-growing product.
- This may be a jumping off point to hypothesize about the links between insecure attachment style and the reclamation of Dante's work as a healing device.

ART			HISTORY			POWER			
LITERATURE			EAST AFRICA AND ITALY			JOURNEY TO		RECLAMATION	
Types of Protest Writing: 1. Straightforward 2. Literature (Garg)	Literature political ramifications: Who is the protagonist, what makes them an individual? (Garg)	Literature is a weapon. (Garg)	Different types of colonization lead to different types of de-colonization. (McClintock)	Natural reaction is postcolonial analysis, but it's important to note the limitations of "postcolonial." Progress is not linear. (McClintock)	<i>In places where Commedia has been translated; What can we learn from the relationship between translator and reader?</i>	Colonialism as a state of mind (Garg)	Irritant + denial of a political role leads to revolt, one way or another (Garg) Revolution through art	<i>Arguably, the thing that makes a person a person is decision making. See propaganda vs. Literature of reclamation, appreciation, in relation to choice.</i> Demonstrates a healthy, or healed attachment.	
"Canon-building is empire building." (Garg) <i>Dante in E. African canon asserts Italian power.</i>	If literature a tool, then "universal themes" can indicate and proliferate power.	Stories manipulated into "colonial battlefields." (deLuca)	"Somalis learned Italian by reading Dante at school, and sometimes even earlier." (de Luca) Development stages	"othering" (Barry)	"the role of 'Africa' in postcolonial theory is different from the role of postcolonial theory in Africa." (McClintock)	"...desire to escape restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identity, and sometimes even race, itself." (Gilroy)	Stories have always modeled to children the ways of life. Freeing Commedia from a manipulated weapon and into a tool of construction.	The displaced individual's desire to feel "intellectually at home" (Morrison) Commedia can be unraveled to accommodate this desire	
"How... to recognize individuality & reconcile it with...hegemonic context?" (Said)	Minority authors might be ascribed to an immediate identity analysis couched in a set of expectations.	Author as a paratext?	"Cultures...seek meaning in the language and images available to them." (Morrison) Unique relationship not fully negative	"Between colonizer and colonized, there is room only for forced labor..." (Cesaire) Dante manipulated	Childhood familiarity with colonizer's culture: Parent-child relationship with unnatural attachment style.	Fanon indicates that the first step for the colonized is to reclaim their own voice to find individual identity. (Barry)	"...literature itself is a site on which ideological struggles are acted out." (Barry)	"A healthy attachment involves an ability to question your society without taking refuge elsewhere." (Garg) Independence	"This visible (colored) world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright." (Morrison) Creation in the face of destruction
Postcolonial lens: no room for universalist claims. (Gilroy) Disregard idea of universal themes.	When, in academia, is it acceptable to primarily analyze a text based on an author's supposed experiences?	Postcolonial criticism aligns with feminist criticism due to development (Barry) Links to attachment theory?	"forced readers" of Dante. Required reading in Italian schools. (De Luca)	How is reception different when one must learn another language to understand a story in the "world canon?"		Stories do not depict a character as one of a homogeneous mass. (Barry) Protagonist true through complexity	The <i>Commedia</i> serves as a model to celebrate situational reality and unify the lands. (De Luca) The freeing of the art itself	"You do not understand the greatest artist, and I do. It is because you do not understand what your author is telling you that you can be inhospitable to me." (Garane)	

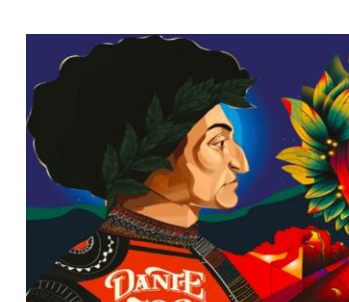
PRIMARY TEXTS



***Il latte e buono* by Garane Garane**
Protagonist, Gashan, departs Mogadishu for Italy, becomes disillusioned with Dante, travels farther West, and finally returns with his own reconciliation of Dante. Parent/child allusions. (Brioni,Mari)



***Links* by Nuruddin Farah**
Protagonist, Jeebleh, describes the state of civil war in Mogadishu as a Dantean journey to hell. Aligns the physical and mental. Also considers humans as "links in a chain."
(Brioni,Mari)



***'Dante the Ethiopian'* by Addis Street Art**
One of three Dante murals at the Addis Ababa celebration of the 700th anniversary of Dante's death. Emulates the theme of reclamation of literature as a tool.

FUTURE QUESTIONS

- The individual vs. the expectations placed on the individual through use of terminology (like post-colonialism)
- How did interpretations of Dante change specific countries and cities over time, and are there any connections?
- How do the class differences seen in Italian schools contribute to the dispersion of Dante and *Commedia* interpretations?
- What role does fear play in search of power?
- The text's journey from weapon to building tool.
- How did the combined experiences of colonization, fascism, and civil war shape literature's journey?
- Look closer at literature created as propaganda versus. Literature manipulated into being propaganda.
- Look closer at the stories of the colonizer in order to resolve their role as “parent” in Garane's “parent-child relationship” between colonizer and colonized.
- Can post-colonialism be aligned with attachment theory and abuse patterns? How does this translate into the individual, the group, and the text itself?

KEY

Lightest green: supportive background information and ideas

Green: Ideas that could lead to a psychological direction for this project

Brown: Ideas that lead to the nature of power and the reclamation of power.

Italics: Ideas and questions raised by the text

SOURCES

