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JASON ALLEN-PAISANT

Dante in Caribbean Poetics: Language, Power, Race

This paper considers the reception of Dante, both the text and the historical figure, among Afro-Caribbean writers of the twentieth century to the present. I am interested in the ways in which the reception of Dante in the Caribbean sheds new light on Caribbean poetics, even as it forces us, in turn, to view Dante's texts in new ways. This endeavour is important since the reception of Dante in the Caribbean has not been an object of study by Dante scholars, and has received little attention by specialists of Caribbean literature.

A similar project to this one is Dennis Looney's study, *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the 'Divine Comedy'*, which documents Dante's critical fortunes among African American writers and artists from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries.¹ Despite the cultural specificity of Looney's monograph, it echoes some of the concerns driving Caribbean writers who 'reinvent' Dante. This is unsurprising, given the memories of loss, separation, and embodied trauma that mark both African American and West Indian culture, by virtue of the historical catastrophes of the Middle Passage and racial enslavement that are common to both.

Looney's study relates the use of Dante by African American creatives to three main perceptions of the Italian poet. First of all, he highlights the parallel that these writers and artists establish between the Black experience of slavery and subsequent aspiration to freedom, and Dante's passage from hell to heaven. Secondly, Looney underscores the presentation of Dante as a politically engaged poet who 'speaks truth to power' (a fact which resonates with the political mandate ascribed to Black American poetics). Thirdly, the journey of Dante-the pilgrim, as Looney explains, was seen by a number of African American creatives as a potential allegory for the freeing of the soul from bondage to the 'sin' of slavery. As readings of Kamau Brathwaite and Lorna Goodison readily reveal, these concerns also shape Caribbean readings and re-writings of Dante. However, in their formalistic concerns, Caribbean writers have adopted distinctive approaches to Dante, as this article will show.

One such distinction lies in the fact that, in the Caribbean corpus, Dante has been enlisted as a partisan in language politics in a much more concerted way than has been evidenced among

¹ Dennis Looney, *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).

African American writers. This fact is undergirded by the distinctive political burden with which language has been tasked in the Caribbean literary tradition. Indeed, language politics and decolonization, at least from the 1930s onwards, have been viewed by Caribbean writers as inseparably tethered, and vernacular poetry has been approached with an urgency not matched in the African American context. This owes much to the differing socio-historical formations of these two spaces. Contrary to Black America, co-opted as the racial other of the American population, the Caribbean islands were far-flung colonies of the Empire. This geographical distance meant, first of all, that, despite the colonialist machinery of assimilation, enslaved Africans were able to conserve more vestiges of their pre-colonial languages than was possible in most of the United States. Secondly, the fact of not being absorbed into the imperial nation also provided a mandate for the expression of linguistic specificity which increased with twentieth-century movements for decolonisation and independence. With such movements, language was perceived as an urgent *sine qua non* for self-determination. Lorna Goodison's translations of Dante, several decades after the first 'dialect poems' of Louise Bennett, and after Kamau Brathwaite first outlined the case for 'nation language' in 1984,² shows the continued significance of Caribbean vernacular discourse to the project of cultural decolonization.³ Other departures that mark Caribbean appropriations of Dante relate, naturally, to particularities within the socio-political realities of these territories, as I will show.

This paper will be devoted to the work of Kamau Brathwaite and Lorna Goodison. I have chosen to focus on these two writers in light of their use of the *Comedy* to explore entangled concerns of race and language in the postcolonial Caribbean, something that sets them apart from others who could also have been considered (Wilson Harris, Aimé Césaire, Derek Walcott).

'Short History of Dis', or Kingston as postcolonial 'house of grief'

One poignant treatment of the interrelated issues of history, race, justice, and freedom that relies on Dante's *Comedy* takes place in Brathwaite's poem 'Short History of Dis, or Middle Passages Today'.⁴ This poem moves away from the *Comedy*'s model in major ways. For one, it drops the model of the guide: Brathwaite as 'pilgrim' is living Kingston's nightmarish

² Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1984).

³ Lorna Goodison, 'Brunetto Lattini: Dante's Inferno Chapter XV', in *Collected Poems*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 2017), pp. 303-307 & 'Canto I —Dante's Inferno', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 557-562.

⁴ Kamau Brathwaite, 'Short History of Dis, or Middle Passages Today', in *Trench Town Rock* (Providence: Lost Roads Publishers, 1994), 61-74.

violence on his own, as a solitary contemplator of events. Another important difference in Brathwaite's text is that the victims of Kingston's post-apocalyptic dystopia are both the 'damned souls' to whom Brathwaite bears witness and the poet-narrator himself, who is very much a 'sufferer' in Kingston's urban nightmare.

Situating Hell on Earth, contrary to Dante's model, is a move that has also been made by other Dante-inspired works that represent some of the twentieth century's most violent atrocities.⁵ In that sense, Brathwaite's upending of Dante's theological conception of Hell and its moral implications finds resonance in the words of Hungarian-born Jewish writer Giorgio Pressburger, whose Italian novel *Nel regno oscuro* deals, among other things, with the memory of the Holocaust: 'Hell is not for sinners. It is not a phantasmagoria into which friends and enemies are cast. Hell is for innocent victims. Only harmless, innocent, defenceless bodies burned there'.⁶ While the victims in 'Short History of Dis' cannot all simply be said to be 'innocent', Brathwaite complicates, at the very least, Western moral construals of innocence and guilt, highlighting, in the process, the complicity of Christian ethics in the imperial history of the West.

'Short History of Dis' itself is from a book of poems called *Trench Town Rock* which bears witness to violent incidents, both personal and social in nature, over the period 16 July 1990 to 17 December 1991.⁷ The book is a multimodal series of six long poems that brings together newspaper reports, eyewitness accounts and transcripts of radio talk shows that it then overlays with Brathwaite's own poetic voice. The overall theme of the book is the depiction of Kingston as a modern *inferno* marked by 'post-apocalyptic Hobbesian conflict'.⁸ Kingston is placed front and centre as a postcolonial 'Sodom & Gomorrah', by virtue of the criminal violence that enshrouds its daily reality.⁹ One poem, titled 'My turn', is about Brathwaite's personal trauma in this world of normalized brutality, as he recounts being bound, gagged, and held at gunpoint in his own home at the same residential complex where a triple murder had been carried out only a few weeks before. 'Short History of Dis' directly connects Kingston's violence to Dante's depiction of Hell in the *Comedy* and, as the full title of the section suggests, presents Kingston's contemporary dystopia as a malignant legacy of European colonisation and slavery.

⁵ See Lino Pertile's essay in this volume, and Manuele Gragnolati, 'Rewriting Dante after Freud and the Shoah', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and others (Vienna and Berlin: Verlag Turia & Kant, 2010), pp. 235-250.

⁶ Giorgio Pressburger, *Nel regno oscuro* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), p. 56. Translation mine.

⁷ Kamau Brathwaite, *Trench Town Rock* (Providence: Lost Roads Publishers, 1994).

⁸ See Nadi Edwards, 'Notes on the Age of Dis: Reading Kingston through Agamben', *Small Axe*, 25 (2008), 1-15 (p.2).

⁹ Brathwaite, *Trench Town Rock*, p. 16.

Throughout the entire book, Brathwaite is keen to emphasize the archival, documentary status of the events he recounts, given that most of them are carefully dated.

Despite departures in narrative pattern, ‘Short History’ draws on the *Comedy* in its narrative line, in that the poem reads as a kind of psychological-metaphysical map, marking the journey of the Pilgrim through Hell, whereby he is led to reflect on the spiritual condition of the ‘sinners’ he encounters, and also on his own. As might be expected, ‘Short History’, like the rest of *Trench Town Rock*, echoes many of the semiotics of Dante’s *Inferno*. However, the bulk of its concerns can be illustrated with reference to *Inferno* 9 through 17 (in other words, to the Circle of the Violent).

Dis offers Brathwaite a metaphorical image for depicting Kingston for two immediate reasons. The first relates to the physical description of Dis in the *Comedy*. It is described as a fortified city (*Inf.* 9.107), whose walls are made of iron. For Brathwaite, the image of fortified walls is suggestive of the built environment of Kingston’s residential neighborhoods marked by high, impregnable walls and iron ‘burglar bars’ that protect their inhabitants from violent crime, even as they also, by the same token, lock them away from the outside world. Brathwaite connects these ‘grills that go up’ to the vicious circle by which exclusion breeds acts of violence and *vice versa*.¹⁰ Kingston’s architectonic formation of defense and isolation is associated, by extension, with ‘the red-tooth dog [and] the squat-face bodyguard’ who must guard its residential housing complexes throughout the night.¹¹ Secondly, in the *Inferno*, Dis’s walls are symbolic of the type of sinners Dante encounters in the city: they are no longer merely victims of appetite or of their own lack of self-control as in the first five circles of hell, these are sinners who are tempered, hardened, and willful (*Inf.* 11.28-31; 49-63). The domination of the animalistic instinct over the human intellect, represented by those who are violent towards nature, their fellow humans, and themselves – thus, the type of sinners of the seventh circle – is the main theme Brathwaite adopts in ‘Short History of Dis’.

His compendium of newspaper reports and first-hand accounts of violent crimes is overwhelming and at times even distressing for the reader, and corresponds primarily to the first tier of Dante’s seventh circle, that is, to those whose sin is violence against neighbours.

¹⁰ Brathwaite, ‘Short History’, p. 68.

¹¹ Brathwaite, ‘Short History’, p. 68.

The first account is of a young football fan kicked and brutally beaten by a police officer on a football field while one hundred thousand football spectators look on. Several newspaper reports are then presented. These include the case of young women who are denied attention and care during labour at a local hospital, and who are forced to give birth on their own; the account of a professor whose dead body is found with his throat cut, ‘twenty-two stab wounds to the neck’, and his head bashed in; and the story of a woman who has her hand chopped off by a ‘swift and deadly attacker’ whose intention is to steal her bracelet. This last incident is so macabre that it defies believability. However, the fact that this tabloid report exists seems to suggest a horizon of expectations that such an event could possibly occur.

Brathwaite also sets about to depict the idea of violence against God and nature. His linking of both systemic urban poverty and state violence (including extrajudicial police executions) to the intertwined paradigms of capital and race is perhaps the clearest connection of the poems to the third ring of Dante’s seventh circle. In this section of the circle of the violent, Dante links violence against God and Nature with the practices of fraud and usury (*Inf.* 11.110). Usury, for Dante, is a corrupted misuse of money that subverts its proper end ‘as a means of exchange, by making it ‘grow’, or yield artificial profits, of itself’.¹² One can see in Brathwaite’s depiction of colonial/neo-colonial forms of violence (based on the combined dynamics of racial dispossession and dehumanization) an analogue to Dante’s definition of ‘usury’, which views it as a corruption of God’s intention for money. For in Brathwaite’s depiction of Kingston, chronic urban poverty is connected to the social neglect that accompanies the capitalist *ethos* which objectifies and deanimates the souls of those who are dehumanized in the drive to make money from money.

This can be illustrated through Brathwaite’s use of the image of the dump, repeatedly evoked in *Trench Town Rock*. The dump is both a real and metaphorical site. The actual ‘dump’ mentioned in Brathwaite’s text is the Riverton City Dump, Kingston’s major landfill site bordered by a number of the city’s most impoverished communities. The dump is also the metaphorical image of urban impoverishment:

[The 1960s] Dungle (urban shantytown in Kingston) [described in *Children of Sisyphus*] become the Riverton City (Kingston) Dump of 1992: an image of a city smouldering in garbage. & man & woman plundering that monstrous HELL of stench

¹² See Simon Ravenscroft, ‘Usury in the *Inferno*: Auditing Dante’s Debt to the Scholastics’, *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 42 (2011), 89-114 (p. 99).

& detritus & death. dead rat. live rat. for bread. bone. dead rotting flesh. dead rotting fish¹³

However, the more privileged citizens who become the objects of predation of those whom the society had long neglected also end up in this metaphorical ‘dump’:

into that Dump goes the dead body of one University lecture (*sic*) & his woman frenn. profane cremation of the silence that surrounds that loss that no one hardly notices.¹⁴

Social neglect, coupled with state violence in the urban slums, is understood as producing a state of despair and an ontological disturbance in which humanness is ‘reduced’.¹⁵

Brathwaite thus denounces the silence that surrounds ignored (black) lives, even as he shows how this lack of recognition and remembrance breeds violence *ad infinitum*, blurring the neat distinctions between perpetrators and victims: the university lecturer and his woman friend are victims, but so are those who systemic poverty and dehumanization harden and turn into murderers. Presenting both systemic poverty and extra-judicial police killings as the spectral shadow of slavery, as the alternative title of the poem (‘Middle Passages’) already intimated, Brathwaite’s suggestion is that contempt for poor black bodies is undergirded by a centuries old ideology that views them as discardable, forgettable, and unmournable. In a word, racism strips black life of value, producing an ontological violence which, in turn, spawns inhuman violence in the victim and corrupts an entire society. To put this differently, in the colonial and neo-colonial machineries, even the innocents are damned, which contrasts with Dante’s idea that in the *Inferno* everybody gets what they deserve. Accordingly, Brathwaite draws a narrative thread through the bloody 1970s in Kingston, when alleged CIA intervention destabilized Michael Manley’s revolutionary socialist government, and the period he depicts. While the 1970s is marked by a lack of mourning for black activists and intellectuals murdered in Kingston’s internecine political warfare, the current period is marked by a lack of mourning for those who are socially dead (as evidenced by those who live in the dump). Both political warfare and state negligence are inter-linked within the broader structural dynamics of the violence created and left by slavery and the colonial system. Though essential differences between cases and persons (Rodney, the prominent Guyanese historian and activist; lecturer

¹³ Brathwaite, ‘Short History’, p. 68.

¹⁴ Brathwaite, ‘Short History’, p. 68.

¹⁵ See Brathwaite, *Trench Town Rock*, pp. 48-49.

and partner; Kingston's forgotten), or the responsibilities and contributing actions of postcolonial governments and leaders, cannot be flattened out – the poems do not necessarily depict this aspect of the reality –, Brathwaite shows that these *different* manifestations of violence are, in fact, part of the continued unfolding of slavery's economy and social structure, a system of capitalist-based dehumanization which can be likened to Dante's conception of 'usury':

[The lecturer's] contract I suspect 'frustrated'/like Walter Rodney's was. And like the victim's of our first (that 18th century) Middle Pass. no memory of no mourning for this passage.¹⁶

Of course, the violence produced by Western racism goes beyond the modern Dis that is Kingston, which Brathwaite states from the beginning, by widening out the seventh circle scenario of Kingston's internecine gun violence and crime to suggest comparable scenarios in colonized Africa. Moreover, he connects Western racism not only to European colonialism in the Caribbean and Africa, but to the Holocaust as well, in a gesture reminiscent of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, mentioning as one of his reference texts the Diary of Anne Frank:

Events that I here chronicle personwise or foolish cd have been recorded in various degrees – some less intense, some as you know far more so – for other Caribbean countries and beyond. See Achebe, see Soyinka, see Biko, see Jackson, see Morislaw Holub, see the *Diary of Anna Frank*, see Sun Yet Sun, see all the Disappeared of S America – *see see see until you bline*'.¹⁷

These poems may strike the reader as a reconception of the duality that separates 'violence against self' (which for Dante corresponds strictly to suicide) and violence against Nature and God in the *Comedy*. For Brathwaite's poetry suggests not only the blurring of the neat distinctions between perpetrator and victim in the aspects of social death described in the modern Kingston, but also the ways in which violence perpetrated by the state against the Black

¹⁶ Brathwaite, 'Short History', p. 68.

¹⁷ Brathwaite, 'Short History', p. 67.

‘other’ subjects of the society can be viewed as violence against self, insofar as it breeds violence for and within the whole of society.

That violence against neighbour creates anomie within the individual can be seen in the way normalized violence reduces human beings to beasts. One example of this condition is the story Brathwaite relays of a car accident involving two people (they were later pronounced dead, as we learn from the article) on the Spanish Town Road in Kingston, in the vicinity of the city’s most impoverished ghettos. Instead of providing assistance, the ‘human scavengers’ on the scene loot the ‘death car’ to capture the belongings of the helpless accident victims.¹⁸ The message here is that the violence constitutive of systemic violence can result in the alienation of the human being from itself, in other words, in the perversion of human nature. Those who become hardened, wilful criminals are sometimes those who have been destroyed by the dominant economic system.

In another poignant vignette, Brathwaite suggests that the affective traumas produced by daily social distress, killings and wanton violence can result in the emotional numbing of the city’s denizens. The last section of ‘Short History of Dis’ is an anecdote about a dog trainer whom the poet witnesses from his balcony. The dog trainer is depicted as a torturer in Hell:

Near where I write this now a man is training dogs to guard you or to kill you
[...]He stands in naked smoke in his ram/shack/le yard of galvanize and cast-off wood
and kennels. a long whip in his leathered hand. his jackboots on. the animal like tied to
him by leash & lash & violence. he grieves the dog an order & it dis/obeys. he hits it
wham wham wham. the grey hound howls. the others writhe & crash against their cages
in dis/pair. hout hout hout howl. the tails aggressive & yet crazy in their primal fear. he
barks again. the animal howls back and dis/obeys [...] The leashed dog howls like
human baby in its terror. sparks squinting from its lurid tearless eye of error.¹⁹

With this passage, we witness the metamorphosis of the man into beast when the former begins to ‘bark’. In fact, in Brathwaite’s narrative, the man becomes more beastly than the dog itself, since it is the dog that howls in its terror. In this rendition of Hell, Brathwaite’s ‘Cerberus’ is thus a human being, another inversion with respect to Dante. The dog trainer’s savagery towards the dog may be an unconscious, if perverse, attempt at exorcising deep-seated

¹⁸ Braithwaite, ‘Short History’, p. 69.

¹⁹ Brathwaite, ‘Short History’, pp. 73-74..

cultural traumas linked to the widespread use of dogs during slavery as instruments of terror against the enslaved. Placed in the context of the city's socio-economic pathologies, this anecdote emphasises the loss of human nature that results when a culture of violence becomes entrenched.

'Short History of Dis' and the larger text, *Trench Town Rock*, are thus, as Nadi Edwards asserts (invoking Agamben), the depiction of 'a city of bare life'.²⁰ They are a meditation on the traumas of senseless violence and brutality in Kingston's postcolonial urban space. However, more than that, they offer a critique of social injustice and the colonial legacy, much of whose power lies in Brathwaite's reversal of Dante's model of eschatological justice.

'Nation language': Theorizing Caribbean vernacular poetry with Dante

Besides its use of the *Inferno*, Brathwaite's work is also informed by the historical figure of Dante. In *History of the Voice*, Dante is cited as an example of a poet who writes in a 'nation language' (Tuscan vernacular) pitched against Latin, but whose work then pushes his own tongue into becoming a national language and gaining its own hegemony:

The forerunner of [nation language] was of course Dante Alighieri who at the beginning of the fourteenth century argued, in *De Vulgari eloquentia* (1304), for the recognition of the (his own) Tuscan vernacular as the nation language to replace Latin as the most natural, complete and accessible means of verbal expression. And the movement was in fact successful throughout Europe with the establishment of national languages and literatures.²¹

Though Brathwaite is concerned with *De Vulgari Eloquentia* in *History of the Voice*, his attention to vernacular discourse in his rendition of Dis is enough to suggest his awareness of Dante's linguistic significance as embodied in his *magnum opus*, the *Comedy*. In his treatise on 'nation language', Brathwaite foregrounds Dante's theory of the vernacular on account of its potential for being 'democratic' and 'national', its ability to provoke reflection on the relationship between language and power, and its vernacular emphasis on affectivity and orality.

²⁰ See Edwards, 'Notes on the Age of Dis', p. 2.

²¹ Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 14.

‘Nation language’ is an expression Brathwaite coins to describe ‘the language which is influenced by [...] the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean Heritage’.²² He asserts that ‘English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree’.²³ ‘Nation language’ therefore relates to *sound*, and to the way the word can become, under the effects of rhythm, *sound*, a carrier of presences, a memory, an energy that attunes one to the unconscious. As Brathwaite says, ‘the noise that it makes is part of the meaning’.²⁴

The collection *Trench Town Rock* is a manifestation of Brathwaite’s concept of ‘nation language’. In the opening poem, ‘The Marley Manor Shoot/in’, the rhythm, timbre and ‘sound explosions’ of the text evoke the performance aesthetic of the Afro-Caribbean storyteller. By mimicking the oral style and pattern of storytelling, Brathwaite produces an impression of embodied presence. His account of a double murder at his apartment complex in ‘The Marley Manor Shoot/in’ begins:

Lass night about 2:45 well well well before the little black bell of the walk of my
electronic clock cd wake me —

aweakened by gunshatt

—the eyes trying to function open too stunned to work out there through the window
& into the dark with its various glints & glows: mosquito, very distant cockcrow, sound
system drum, the tumbrel of a passing engine somewhere some/where in that dark. It
must have been an ear/ring’s earlier sound that sprawled me to the window. but it was

TWO SHATTS

—silence—

Not evening the dogs barking or the trees blazing
& then a cry we couldn’t see of
do

²² Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 310.

²³ Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 310.

²⁴ Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 311.

do

do

nuh kill me

answered by a volley of some

SEVEN

Crack-like-firecracker-racket shats & then a soundless figure fleeing like on air towards
the right of sound perhaps towards the fence or laundry?

Silence²⁵

Words and phrases in bold type and enlarged fonts, placed in blocks or set apart from the balance of the text, form what Brathwaite refers to as the ‘voice of the fonts’.²⁶ The words in bold type are meant to correspond to increases in decibel volume and in shouts by a live performer.

It has already been shown that Brathwaite is influenced by the stylings of Afro-Caribbean musical forms. He has singled out calypso in *History of the Voice*²⁷ but the influence of dub, which emerged as a phenomenon in Jamaica in the 1970s, is perceptible as well. Dub’s aesthetic is constituted by frequent ruptures in tone and speed of delivery, and by changes in the texture of the voice.²⁸ Unlike the iambic pentameter that ‘travels in a single forward plane towards the horizon of its end’,²⁹ Brathwaite’s dub-infused lines in ‘Short History’ dip and deepen and form intervallic patterns. Repetitions, such as ‘well well well’ are meant to dilate the sound for a moment, breaking the forward movement of the rhythm, thus fostering the audience’s concentration, in the same way the Afro-Caribbean storyteller uses repetition to hypnotise their audience.

²⁵ Brathwaite, *Trench Town Rock*, pp. 9-10. There are no typos in this transcription. Misspellings constitute deliberate plays on lexical units on the part of Brathwaite. I have tried as much as possible to convey the variations in font size in this text; however, because of the constraints of space, these attempts are inadequate for conveying such variations in size, some of which are significant in dimension.

²⁶ Kamau Brathwaite and Nathaniel Mackey, *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (New York: We, 1999), p. 176.

²⁷ Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 312.

²⁸ See Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and shattered songs in Jamaican reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

²⁹ Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, p. 312.

Brathwaite's poetic aesthetic is designed to disproportionately suggest communication and orality through an emphasis on rhythm and breath. Moreover, the reader is not meant to be a passive receiver but to stumble upon encounter with the sounds, so the '/'s produce forced breaks and dynamic mental shifts between the different morphemic units of the word, a gesture that results in a productive floating of the signifier: 'some/where', 'ear/ring', and so on.

Words such as 'shatt' and 'evening' (for 'even') are meant to mimic the accents of Jamaican speech as well as the metamorphoses that British English undergoes in the Jamaican context. Brathwaite thus privileges the soundscape of Caribbean Creole linguistics by imitating the sonorities of vowels and consonants in vernacular discourse through spellings such as 'gunshatt' and 'two shatts'. The poems thus emphasize the *different forms* of vernacular discourse that are dialects, accents, slang, and even the morphological inflections that occur as a result of the sometimes difficult marriage of British English and the Jamaican vernacular. This bringing together of multiple linguistic and stylistic sources is reminiscent of Dante's innovative use of the vernacular, theorized in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, articulated in the *Convivio* and fully embraced in the *Commedia*, through which the Tuscan poet actively sought to raise his 'vulgar' language to a higher status with respect to Latin, the language of power, science and religion.³⁰

The effect of the oral aesthetic in Brathwaite's poems is to create a 'continuum', which then becomes necessary for the meaning of the sounds. Shared sounds create *recognition* and solidify a sense of community, which some scholars understand to be the effect created by Dante's invention of a vernacular poetry in his fourteenth-century context.³¹ For to render poetry in vernacular language is to evoke orality (even if specific codes used may vary widely), by virtue of the communication that the vernacular establishes, and of the way the vernacular voice speaks to its target audience, that is, beyond words, and through a *sound* shared between a community of bodies. Accordingly, Joseph Zampetti suggests that the effect of Dante's use of vernacular discourse was to create a 'deliberative' communal space that could be accessed by as many as possible.³² This, for Brathwaite, is a major aspect of the appeal of Dante, the work and the historical figure, though he goes beyond Dante in the way he transposes all the codes of oral voice poetry into the text, in the way sound replicates the very environment of

³⁰ See *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*, ed. by Fortuna, Gragnolati and Trabanti (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), for a thorough discussion of this subject.

³¹ See Marianne Shapiro, *De Vulgari Eloquentia: Dante's book of exile* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) and Joseph P. Zampetti, 'A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric: Reading Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia*', *Inquiries Journal*, 9 (2017), <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1617>.

³² See Zampetti, 'A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric'.

the performance space, through aural and visual indexes of the live communication of performer and audience. Brathwaite's use of repetition, his attempt to capture tone and aural effects through visual representation on the page is a formal departure from the linguistic register of the *terza rima*, which is based on the ideal of the repeatability of a fixed metrical pattern.

Lorna Goodison: Thinking power and rhetoric through Dante

Arguably, language functions as an even more political space in Lorna Goodison's rewritings of Dante, given that in these poems, Goodison presents herself overtly as a new Dante, aspiring to do for Caribbean language what Dante did for the Italian language in the fourteenth century. Goodison is a close reader of the *Comedy* and her translations of *Inferno* 1 and 15 have appeared in separate poetry collections. In an interview with Jacqueline Bishop, Goodison reveals that,

[when] I was asked by the South Bank Centre to take part in a special celebration to commemorate the [700th] anniversary of the publication of Dante's *Inferno*, Ted [Chamberlin, my husband] got me every English translation of the *Inferno* ever written and I spent time in 'hell' reading multiple translations of Dante's *Inferno* for weeks! I ended up rewriting Canto 15 – Brunetto Latini, and setting it in Jamaica. Since then I have rewritten three other cantos, and I might be ready to tackle another now.³³

Of the four cantos that Goodison claims to have rewritten, only two have so far appeared in print. These two poems – 'Canto I – Dante's *Inferno*' from the collection *Oracabessa*, and 'Brunetto Latini' from *Travelling Mercies* – can be regarded as 'transgressive translations'³⁴ of Dante's *Inferno* inasmuch as they recreate the *Inferno* for a new audience, reframing the text so that a new narrative of personal and collective spiritual yearning may be told.

In 'Canto I – Dante's *Inferno*', we read that,

Halfway through the journey of my life

³³ Lorna Goodison, 'The Muse of Memory is the Muse of Poetry: Interview with Jacqueline Bishop', in 'Bookends', *The Sunday Observer*, March 4, 2018, pp. 1-4.

³⁴ See Josephine Balmer, 'Handbags and Gladrags: A woman in transgression, reflecting', *Classical Receptions Journal*, 4 (2012), 1-11.

I come to find myself in a wild rocky place
for to tell you the truth my feet had strayed.³⁵

The pattern of the narrative is the same as in Dante's *Inferno*: the narrator has strayed from the right path and is in a state of moral degradation from which she is yearning to free herself. Faced with a series of obstacles preventing her from climbing up the mountain and attaining, ultimately, the heavenly summit, she receives direction from a spiritual guide sent by Providence to assist her. This guide, we find out, is the poet Derek Walcott, who, unlike Dante's Virgil, was still alive at the time this poem was published. Yet, Goodison speaks of Walcott as of one already dead:

[...] I am not a man though once I was.
[...] I was born after Victoria

sat long upon her throne I was one of the first at the college
of Mona where the great minds of our archipelago
(along with mediocre) came to be trained in their day.

I am a poet, painter, and playwright founder of the finest
band of thespians ever collected in the Caribbean³⁶

To the poet Walcott, the Pilgrim Goodison, expressing her admiration, declares:

You were my guide and mentor and it is from your example
That I have crafted this style for which
people worldwide now give me speak (Goodison, 2017b: 560)

In Goodison's translation of *Inferno* 1, Walcott cannot enter paradise because,

[...]the ruler

³⁵ Lorna Goodison, 'Canto I —Dante's *Inferno*', *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2017), pp.557-562 (p.557).

³⁶ Goodison, 'Canto I', p.560.

of the higher heights above, forbids that that I who rebelled
 against all forms of hierarchy and divisions of class and race,
 should approach unto that elevated place of state.³⁷

With this conversation taking place in the imagination, and in the future, with a dead Walcott, Goodison is constructing a mythology, not only of Walcott, but of herself. We witness Goodison articulating a sense of personal identity, putting herself, instead of Dante, at the centre of the poem. In this sense, Goodison's move is the opposite of what Looney sees Ralph Ellison's as doing in *Invisible Man*, that is, using Dante 'both to migrate into and to integrate his work with the European canon, [...claiming] Dante as his prophetic muse'.³⁸

What some readers may find disappointing is that there is little trace of the specificity of Goodison's female presence in the narrative. What possibilities lie in narrativizing Dante as a black woman? How might this influence the literary and stylistic choices of the text, the gaze of the protagonist, the depiction and construal of sin, the poetic voice? What is Dante's relationship to Beatrice in this rendition, and what *sort* of figure would Goodison's Beatrice be? This is an aspect of the re-writing which holds much promise and it would please this writer to see a deeper exploration of the issues of both gender and female subjectivity, in respect of a re-reading of Dante, when considered from a black female perspective.

That said, 'Canto I' offers a very interesting retake of the *Comedy*. Culturally speaking, Goodison not only articulates her relationship with the dead (the poem suggests the need for, or at least the importance of, counsel from the dead in the crises of one's life journey), but her self-fabulation also positions itself within an overall traditional Afro-Caribbean belief in the closeness of the dead to the community and their role as guide to the living. This latter fact is readily indicated by Goodison's suggestion to Walcott (not thus far named) that he may be a *duppy* (Jamaican name for the manifestation of the soul of a dead person):

And when I saw him in that terrible place I cried out
 help me do pity me whoever you may be
 whether living man or a May Pen duppy, do help me³⁹

³⁷ Goodison, 'Canto I', pp.561-562.

³⁸ Looney, *Freedom Readers*, p. 66.

³⁹ Goodison, 'Canto I', p.559.

The duppy is a spirit that may be harnessed for good or evil. In the former case, it can bring omens and messages from the world of the dead that provide information to the living, guide them, and make them wiser. Likewise, in this story, Walcott's duppy is invoked to save Goodison from the leopardess, the lion, and the wolf. The wolf threatens since 'her nature is so vile so grasping so run-against so bad mind'. Because 'bad mind' is, in Jamaican popular belief, evil thoughts towards another person deemed to have real spiritual potential to inflict harm, the she-wolf represents spiritual and physical dangers that threaten Goodison's existence as a person and as a poet both now and in the future.

Another semantic departure can be seen in the figure of Goodison's 'spotted leopardess'; it is no longer a leopard, as in Dante's text. The spotted leopardess is imagined as a bloodsucker bleeding the riches of the land, a reference to Jamaica's corrupt politicians. This bloodthirsty beast will be allowed to continue to terrorise the people, Goodison's Guide says, until 'the great one' comes. This 'great one' is described as a figure for whom 'Grandy Nanny, Marcus Garvey,/ and all our other mighty freedom fighters were preparing us'.

Another interesting reinterpretation of Dante's Canto I is that the 'paradise' Goodison imagines in her poem seems to be a space of political and social power, for Goodison's guide refers to the place to which he guides the poet as 'that elevated place of state'. This 'elevated place' is controlled by 'straw bosses', urban argot for workers who serve as supervisors for other workers, and who inflate their authority. This phrase, suggestive of a certain contempt on Goodison's part towards her island's political leaders, may also be suggesting that in the globalised neoliberal economic paradigm, these leaders are merely foot soldiers being puppeteered by the larger forces of global capital (IMF, World Bank, and so on). These 'straw bosses who rule these places [of state] and sit on high/ Say, 'We and we alone decide who will fall and who will rise'.⁴⁰ Goodison's idea of 'Paradise' in her 'Canto I' thus seems a rather ambiguous place: not a place of bliss, as in the *Comedy*, but a site representative of a desired future which is delayed, prevented from being actualised, by the current state of corruption of the country's leaders and by oppression from combined local and global forces. Rather unsurprisingly, in light of the above, the 'damned' in Goodison's conception of 'Inferno' are not imagined merely as transgressors, as in Dante's *Inferno*, but as 'those lost souls you say that are bowed down so low/ with grief and who are in need of comfort and hope'⁴¹. Both her 'Inferno' and her 'Paradise' are thus evocative of the anomic socio-economic realities which

⁴⁰ Goodison, 'Canto I', p.562.

⁴¹ Goodison, 'Canto I', p.562.

Brathwaite depicts in his book *Trench Town Rock*. Perhaps in going to Paradise, Goodison is expressing faith in the capacity of poetry to positively transform the ‘elevated place of state’.

Goodison’s other Creole rendition of the *Comedy* is her translation of *Inferno XV*, which she entitles ‘Brunetto Latini: Dante’s Inferno, Canto XV’. Latini in the *Comedy* is a notary and rhetorician who served in the popular Florentine government in the decade before Dante was born and who also exerted some influence, if indirect, in the education of the young Dante. He is described by Dante as a ‘dear, good father’ (*Inferno* 15.82) who ‘taught me how a man becomes eternal’ (*Inferno* 15.85). Goodison reframes this Dantean character as a highly respected teacher and public intellectual in the island of Jamaica, one Teacher Brown (her word association between Brunetto and the colour brown (‘bruno’ in Italian) will not be lost on the reader of Italian, even if the real-life identity — if there is one — of this character is not revealed in the text). Like Walcott in ‘Canto I’, Teacher Brown is a duppy and is seen walking in a ‘procession of duppies’

shuffling below
 the banking, staring up into our faces like how some
 scrutinise one another under the light of a new moon.
 Staring, like fast people trying to see who passing by
 dark road on a moonless night; staring like an old tailor

 with glaucoma trying hard to thread a fine-eyed needle.
 The staring duppies screwed their faces and frowned,
 then one sight me, grab me by the hem of my gown

 and said, ‘Lord have mercy, could this really be true,
 dear poet is it you?’⁴²

Here again, Goodison is the embodiment of the poet as myth-maker, telling a narrative that creates and cements her space in the world, but also telling it by reshaping certain given codes, including the semiotics of Dante’s canonical text. One such act of reshaping concerns the characterization of Teacher Brown. One thing that may strike the reader is the fact that Teacher

⁴² Lorna Goodison, ‘Brunetto Latini: Dante’s Inferno, Canto XV’, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2017), pp.303-307 (pp. 303-304).

Brown is unmarked by the ambivalence that Dante has towards the figure of Brunetto. For all the admiration that Dante has for his mentor, he places Brunetto Latini in the seventh circle of hell, the circle of the violent as we have seen, but Brunetto is located in its third ring, the space reserved for the sodomites. Goodison avoids any such association with Teacher Brown. It is unlikely that this omission is accidental: firstly, Goodison's knowledge of the *Inferno* is not a cursory one as we have seen; secondly, given the prevalence of homophobia in Jamaican culture, might her refusal to damn her 'Brunetto' as a sodomite have been a deliberate act on her part to avoid any such categorisation of Teacher Brown, a selected gesture under different circumstances?

Another significant difference relates to the fact that these Creole translations of Dante's texts effectively position him as a postcolonial partisan in Caribbean efforts to promote a rhetorical theory of the vernacular, of which one of the champions is Kamau Brathwaite, as we have seen. I have already alluded to the parallels Brathwaite perceives between the particular socio-historical situation in Dante's medieval Italy and the linguistic context of Caribbean nation language. In *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite articulates a philosophy of language by referring to *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, in which Dante proposes the Tuscan vernacular as a 'vulgar', maternal language that contrasted with the authoritative, artificial and learned Latin, the language of power.⁴³ Goodison articulates a similar problematic: 'you are treading in the footsteps of someone who opted to write in his local patois [...] it gives me permission to locate [the *Comedy*] in Jamaica and allows [the poetry] to come out the way it does'.⁴⁴ As such, her rhetorical discourse is marked by an urgency to give space to Jamaican ways of thinking and speaking marginalized in poetry.

For her, the Jamaican vernacular is integral in the attempt at weaving a narrative of personal and collective selfhood. The infusion of the vernacular is readily observed in the lines quoted above, in terms such as 'fast' (Jamaican word meaning 'prying' or 'inquisitive'), 'screwed their faces' and the peculiar use of the verb 'sight'. The poem abounds in Jamaican Creole expressions and sayings, Creole syntax and grammar. The Jamaican collective imaginary is strongly present: in Teacher Brown's warnings against the 'bad-minded'; in his declaration that Goodison's success will make her the envy of the two local political parties; in the evocation of local flora and fauna. Likewise, in Canto I, we readily notice the lexical field

⁴³ See Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gagnolati, and Jürgen Trabant, 'Introduction', in *Dante's Plurilingualism*.

⁴⁴ Lorna Goodison, 'Personal Interview', London, March 11, 2019.

marked by the Jamaican vernacular. One example is of the lion which comes ‘tearing down/ toward [Goodison...],

[...] hungry driving him

like a big engine so that even the breeze blow like it
was afraid. Then a she-wolf, she lurking beside him
craven, scrawny, maugre you could see white squall

at her mouth corner [...] ⁴⁵

Particularities of the local language include ‘hungry’ used as a noun, ‘maugre’ meaning ‘scrawny’, and ‘white squall’, dried or drying spittle at the corner of the lips often considered to be a sign of hunger. Goodison’s choice of images thus turn the poem into a West Indian poem, writing her people into literature as the vernacular poet Louise Bennett had done decades before.

Moreover, the use of the vernacular can communicate a sense of the political by virtue of the intimate sense of recognition and shared orality that vernacular discourse affords and of its ability to be accessed by the greatest number. In her rendition of *Inferno* Canto XV, Goodison’s Dante and his guide are found ‘proceeding along the built-up mud banking/ above a water course like an infernal Bog Walk gorge [a valley in Jamaica known for frequent flooding]’.⁴⁶ The mud banking designed to prevent flooding is poorly built: ‘It’s as if hell’s civil engineer got an illegal gully contract/ to bitch-up some similar but lean-side walls like that’. The allusion to ‘illegal gully contract’ evokes the culture of political corruption that results in numerous contracts being improperly awarded by sitting politicians as a way of solidifying political alliances or in exchange for political favours. The result in these cases is infrastructure that is ‘bitched up’, that is, shoddily constructed. In this case, Goodison suggests that it could result in the kind of dangerous flooding which it was meant to prevent. The victims of such negligence and corruption are, of course, the most vulnerable in society. This scenario is reminiscent of Brathwaite’s depiction of Kingston’s social anomie above.

⁴⁵ Goodison, ‘Canto I’, p.559.

⁴⁶ Goodison, ‘Brunetto Latini’, p. 303.

To talk about ‘illegal gully contract’, and ‘bitching-up [...] lean-side walls’ as Goodison does, is to enter the reality of the ordinary folk.⁴⁷ It is also to stage images of this reality for the reader of English unfamiliar with it. Besides, by referencing ‘the gully contract’, Goodison instantly enters into the political terrain of Jamaica.

One of the things we gather from Goodison’s poems (the ones treated here, but her poetry in general), is her belief in the power of vernacular discourse to humanize or empower disempowered groups. Indeed, since language is integrally tied to the identities of peoples and groups, the power of linguistic choices to reflect, sustain, or challenge balances of power becomes clear enough, and Goodison’s poetic aesthetic is marked by an awareness of this fact. Like Brathwaite, she uses the vernacular to challenge dominant ways of thinking, knowing and speaking. Even if the formal sound arrangements and operations of her poetry differ perceptibly from Brathwaite’s, it is marked as well by an attempt at rearticulating language and thus empowering disempowered groups by having their vernacular voices heard in the literary space of the poem.

Thus, ‘Brunetto Latini’, like ‘Canto I’, is a poem that uses Dante as a means of solidifying Goodison’s heritage, and enlisting the historical figure as an ally in the construction of a Jamaican vernacular poetry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Brathwaite and Goodison help us to interrogate Dante’s work in relation to parts of the world far removed from Dante’s Europe, and yet entangled with the modern Europe in which Dante is enshrined as a monument of the humanist tradition. Brathwaite’s ‘Short History of Dis’ presents us with a poet faced with the diminishing of the certainties of intellect and of the humanizing capabilities of poetry in the light of the terror and absurdity of pervasive violence. However, just as importantly, Brathwaite’s text, building on Dante’s conception of usury, interprets the connection between violence, the abuse of money, and the perversion of human nature in the light of foundational aspects of modernity, namely capitalism and race. Bringing this reality to bear on Kingston’s contemporary reality, Brathwaite also connects it to a modern global history, revisiting narratives of violence against self, the Other, and Nature, in which the history of capitalism itself is imbricated.

⁴⁷ Goodison, ‘Brunetto Latini’, p. 303.

Goodison's rewritings of the *Inferno* are also grounded in the realities of race and colonial history, but in different ways. Weaving together issues of race, gender, and language in ways that sometimes upend the canonicity of the 'original' text, they seek for ways of understanding and living the Caribbean's colonial history in the contemporary moment. Using vernacular discourse as a political instrument is key to such ways of living. Goodison's overall message is that language is epistemic. As such, she takes advantage of the linguistic versatility of the vernacular, a product of the colonially imposed English language, to subvert that language and stage the experiences and voices of disempowered black populations which its hegemonic usage excludes.

For Brathwaite, the importance of the vernacular is paramount as well, since vernacular discourse is indispensable in poetry that serves as testimony to a cultural experience of epistemic marginalization. In a word, vernacular rhetoric must be marshalled to deconstruct the epistemic operation of power.