



## **Bodies, theology and Dante's *Divine Comedy*: Engaging Dante and Aïda Muluneh**

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### **Abstract**

Placing the words *Comedy* and Africa in the same sentence, is like laying claim to two expansive and complex entities which do not immediately bear relation to another and yet, there is ample opportunity for engagement. The article begins by showing how a young South African's reading of the *Divine Comedy* through the lens of her own preoccupation with the body and its theo-performative demeanour can bring fresh perspectives to the fore. A primary instance of the intersection between the body, God and theological performance is the Ethiopian artist Aïda Muluneh's interpretation of *Inferno*, canto xx. Muluneh's performative expression transforms the scope and meaning of tears in the *Comedy* by bringing to bear her own particularity. Here, tears become central in unveiling the truth that the *Comedy* speaks. The article explores the significant role that gestures have in giving form to the *Divine Comedy*. As the logic of relationality, love forms the spine of this article while drawing together the themes of creation and incarnation. The article ends by suggesting that if one has a proper understanding of the relationship between humans and the created order, one might find a theology from below latent in the *Comedy*.

### **Keywords**

*Creation; relationality; love; Christology; anthropology; aesthetics*

Only few studies on Dante focus on the body and the role that gestures, signs, and bodily depictions play in communicating the truths that the *Divine Comedy* (*Comedy*) speaks. One reason for this might suggest that the *Comedy* is first and foremost a poetic masterpiece where the body and its depictions are secondary to the literary mechanisms Dante-poet

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1 A word of thanks also to the reviewers whose comments enriched this contribution.

uses.<sup>2</sup> A reading where the focus falls on the importance of the presence of another in the *Comedy*, however, provides new clues with which to engage the theology of the *Comedy*.

In the exposition that follows, the author suggests that the body (that entity which marks existence as relational through and through) gives fresh insights in a reading of the *Divine Comedy*. A reading that places not only body and God in focus but also body and creation. The distinctively embodied hermeneutical framework is novel since the studies that proliferate theology as it relates to Dante studies have not yet considered how the presence or absence of right-relations signposts key theological moments in the *Divine Comedy*. Further engaging Aïda Muluneh's performative articulation of *Inferno* xx to uncover such an embodied theological aesthetic places this contribution within an established school of thought which regards the form and content of theological writing as two sides of a singular communicative act.<sup>3</sup> This means that the format of a text (its tenor, style and presentation) has as much to do with the meaning of a text as its content. When focussing on the form and content of the *Comedy*, the contribution reads the *Comedy* as a text having to do with the transformation of the self in the presence of the divine while allowing its reader to give context and meaning to such transformation. To explore the possibilities that arise at the intersection of theology and poetry, one should define what the body itself means in the context of this study.

The body, with its multifaceted manners of learning through the senses and their perceptions, is the constitutive element that makes a person a sense-perceptual self.<sup>4</sup> The French phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, made

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2 Please note that, in what follows, “Dante-pilgrim” refers to the actual character in the *Comedy*, and “Dante-author” or “Dante-poet” to the poet himself.

3 I am particularly indebted to Janet Soskice's established school of thought on the form and content of theological writing. See Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 37 especially.

4 There is a new wave of interest in the work of the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, within theological circles. His phenomenology of perception and ontology of the flesh provides fertile ground for conceptualising the permeability that exists between a self and another. See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: North-western University Press, 1968), Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul*, trans. Paul Milan (New York: Humanity Books, 2001). For the incorporation of Merleau-Ponty's thought in theology see Andreas Nordlander,

headway with this thesis as he systematically delineated how perception changes the meaning of existence and how each person (what I call a sense-perceptual self)<sup>5</sup> engages with the world in a manner uniquely consistent with their time, context, and subjectivity. When a sense-perceptual self thus perceives the world, that person does so in terms of the complex network of signification in which they stand. The intertwining of subject and world that comes with the sensory and its signification places the self within a cosmos of relations. At this point a person is as much part of the individual as they are of the collective.<sup>6</sup> Conceptualised in this participatory sense, persons stand dialogically open to creature, creation, and Creator.

The body and its sense-perceptual engagements signifies the experience of being in relation to another. Through the integrative practice of speech (to name just one), the sense-perceptual self makes the invisible visible through words, gestures, and deeds. First, the body provides the corporeal grammar<sup>7</sup> by which the relation of self to other manifests itself, and second, the body is the “measure” by which the quality of relations between persons gets articulated. The different senses in which the body is being explored here refuses any flight from the material. Focusing on the body in particular serves our reading of the *Comedy* since scholars are increasingly finding in the *Comedy*'s depiction of bodies a theological foregrounding.

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“The Wonder of Immanence: Merleau-Ponty and the Problem of Creation.” *Modern Theology* 29 (2013): 104–23; Nordlander, *Figuring Flesh in Creation. Merleau-Ponty in Conversation with Philosophical Theology*. (Sweden: Lund University, 2011), and Orion Edgar, *Things Seen and Unseen* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016).

- 5 I employ the term “sense-perceptual self” as a means of describing a person whose understanding of the world is mediated by the information which comes to that person through the senses and its perceptions, as well as the processing of such information through apprehension and comprehension. For a full exposition, see Rozelle Robson Bosch. “A Christian Ontology of the Flesh: Word, Symbol, Performance.” PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2020. The logic of apprehension and comprehension as two different aesthetic modalities comes from Malcolm Guite’s theorising. See Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 53–74.
- 6 My own thoughts on the communal and relational has been shaped by the multi-cultural and multi-linguistic churches I have grown up in. I also draw on the work of Susan Eastman, see Susan Grove Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul’s Anthropology* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2017); Eastman, “Oneself in Another: Participation and the Spirit in Romans 8,” in K. Vanhoozer, C. R. Campbell, and M. Thate (eds.), “*In Christ*” in *Paul: Explorations in Paul’s Theology of Union and Participation*, WUNT/II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 103–126 with its Pauline construction of the self.
- 7 See note 4.

One may thus mine the *Comedy* for its depictions of persons in terms of their relations with others, and one may home in on these relations and their visual representation. Both approaches prove useful as they promise a rich tapestry of embodied relations as the making visible of that which Dante speaks.

One study that shows the potentiality of reading persons and their depictions in the *Comedy* is Heather Webb's *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman*, a study which defines aerial bodies in *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* as relational entities.<sup>8</sup> The present contribution finds resonance with Webb's reading of the *Comedy* since her definition of personhood captures a certain Pauline register of the self.<sup>9</sup> Webb's suggestion that personhood denotes the whole person in the *Comedy*, and that the extent to which persons accepted or renounced such personhood, as depicted in the bodies of those in *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, provides a hermeneutical tool with which to engage not only the sense-perceptual self as dialogically open but also Aïda Muluneh's unique aesthetic approach.<sup>10</sup>

The contribution also goes further in that it asks how a reading of the *Comedy* finds fresh expression through the performative art of the Ethiopian artist, Aïda Muluneh. Aïda Muluneh's Series 99 (nine-nine) visually signifies the logic of the individual and communal that the author argues is latent to the *Comedy*. Love, the register that depicts the presence or absence of right relations in the *Comedy*, unfolds as the logic that holds together Creator, creature and creation. In as much as persons in the *Comedy* acknowledge the Love that grounds their being and brings them into communion with self, creation and God, so their appearances reflect either damnation or beatification. The relationship between the visible and the invisible in the *Comedy* drives the idea forward that gestures, cataphatically and apophatically, point to the vision of the new creation that Dante pilgrim's sojourning reveals.

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8 Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17–19.

9 Webb, *Dante's Persons*, 30.

10 Webb, *Dante's Persons*, 11.

Understanding the relationship that the body has to personhood and the influence that personhood exerts over the body in conversation with the *Comedy*, brings new readings into perspective. One exceptional instance that portrays the dialogue between a conception of the self and the *Comedy* is the 2015 Smithsonian National Museum of African Art's exhibition titled, "The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists."<sup>11</sup> The Ethiopian born artist, Aïda Muluneh, participated in the exhibition with her Series 99 where she uses seven frames to visually illustrate her interpretation of *Inferno*, canto xx.<sup>12</sup>

Before reading the *Comedy* with corporeality, performance art and a theology from below in mind, a couple of clarifications: First, one must make clear what mechanisms are available when making sense of the *Comedy* through art and theology. Second, one must understand the role that words play in giving form and content to literary texts. Third, one must describe the relationship between the body, theology, and the *Comedy* and the implications that it bears for a reading of *Inferno* xx. Finally, one must articulate the ways in which a reading of the *Comedy* and the body can frame a theology that starts with persons and ends with the vision of the incarnate God as a vision of beatific relations.

## Speaking truth in words and gestures

Speaking truth in poetry occurs primarily through words. This means of description is central to Dante pilgrim's sojourning, and Dante poet's narration of such sojourning in view of his place of birth, Florence, and its

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11 Forty contemporary artists took part in the exhibition, representing eighteen different African countries as well as the African diaspora. See Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. *The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists* (n.d. blog). [Online]. Available: <https://africa.si.edu/pressrelease/the-divine-comedy-heaven-purgatory-and-hell-revisited-by-contemporary-african-artist/> [Accessed: 20 February 2019].

12 Muluneh's art expresses a uniquely Ethiopian aesthetic, one which, although not pertinent to Series 99, lends from the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. Aïda Muluneh, "In Conversation with Aïda Muluneh on Series 99 and an Eastern Orthodox Aesthetic." Interview by Rozelle Bosch (2019)." Skype.

complex political and ecclesial landscape.<sup>13</sup> Written in Dante’s vernacular (Italian), the *Comedy* divides into three volumes, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Each volume has 33 Cantos (except for *Inferno*’s 34th Canto) that together make up 100 Cantos – a number of completion, gesturing to the importance of the architecture of the *Comedy* as a whole, and the invitation that it extends to participate in the truth that it speaks.<sup>14</sup>

Words by their very nature are abstract and, therefore, inaccessible to the senses, or so one might think when first approaching the *Comedy*. One quickly finds, however, that the *Comedy* communicates visually in every conceivable way by coupling words with bodily depictions. One strategy of note is the role that gestures (as the speaking of the body) have in strengthening the *Comedy*’s communicative potential. Per example, a smile in the *Comedy* can signify the presence of right relations between self, other and divine.<sup>15</sup> Webb suggests: “Gestures precede and accompany words, offering signs that can be intuitively and viscerally grasped at the same time as they provide a holistic sense of the individual gesturing in all of her corporeality and intentionality.”<sup>16</sup> While Webb does not confine herself to gestures with a theological foregrounding alone, she shows how a smile, the folding of hands in prayer, and weeping, all convey a truth that one can read theologically. Each gesture here becomes a subtext expressing the invisible in bodily and sense-perceptual terms.

The *Comedy* is exceptional in the way that it employs words as well as gestures to make visible the truth that Dante speaks. Coming to know such truth involves various sense-perceptual processes. In Christian poetry, Malcolm Guite shows, the invisible can also denote the ineffable. Capturing

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13 For those unfamiliar with Dante Alighieri: he was an Italian poet who lived during the thirteenth century. He came from an influential family who were active within the political landscape of Florence. Dante himself became involved in politics but was charged with political discrepancies. He was given the choice to either admit to the charge himself or face exile. The latter became his reality. During his exile, Dante wrote the *Comedy* which narrates his sojourning from hell, through purgatory, and to heaven. He uses the politically unstable Florence with its papal feuds and social vices as the topic of discussion. See Robin Kirkpatrick in Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, ed. and trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Group, 2007), xvi-xxxiii.

14 Kirkpatrick in Alighieri, *Inferno*, 446.

15 Kirkpatrick in Alighieri, *Inferno*, ci.

16 Webb, Dante’s Persons, 35.

divine presence through words requires that the imagination apprehend the divine in the everyday through perception, and comprehend such revelatory presence.<sup>17</sup> Between the apprehension and the comprehension of the invisible, words make visible that which is invisible and so presents God incarnate by naming such presence.<sup>18</sup> The senses play a central part as they provide the particular and embodied (corporeal) grammar by which a person perceives the divine.

The Comedy, as a literary masterpiece that incorporates both words and gestures, presents Dante's text to the reader in visual and embodied terms. The ways in which bodies speak through gesture and symbol in the *Comedy* invites its reader to associate and interpret the *Comedy* for themselves through their own corporeal grammar.<sup>19</sup> This task of interpreting places the reader in a participatory relationship to the *Comedy*, where each new interpretation becomes a new manner of embodying the *Comedy*.<sup>20</sup>

## The body, the *Comedy*, and theology

The form and content of the *Comedy* gestures to a recurring theme, namely, the poet and pilgrim's invitation to take part in the text through perception and interpretation.<sup>21</sup> With this invitation arises new avenues for engaging the *Comedy* theologically. Although Dante's *Comedy* is not technically a religious text, its thematic is theological through and through. When reading religious texts, Janet Soskice suggests, one should pay equal

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17 Guite expands on this logic in chapter two titled, "Truth and Feigning: Story and Play" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest*. See Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 53–74.

18 Guite, Faith, Hope, and Poetry, 58–61. See also Janet Martin Soskice, "Monica's Tears: Augustine on Words and Speech." *New Blackfriars* 83, no. 980 (2002): 448–58.

19 When speaking of a corporeal grammar then the author refers to a vocabulary that holds visible and invisible simultaneously. The usefulness of the term 'corporeal grammar' comes to play where abstract and corporeal perpetually meet, especially in theological description.

20 Simon Njami, "The Secret of Eternal Life," in *The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists* (Germany: Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt am Main, Smithsonian National Museum of Art, Kerber Art, 2014), 28–33.

21 Kirkpatrick in Alighieri, *Inferno*, ci.

attention to the content and form such writing takes.<sup>22</sup> The writings of a mystic such as Julian of Norwich, for example, is inductive and self-involving.<sup>23</sup> Her *Revelations of Divine Love* takes the Trinitarian address of the Cross she receives and expresses this address in visceral terms. One may say the same of the centrality of the relationship between form and content, and the ways in which the two informs the tenor of a text, when reading the *Comedy*.

The tenor of the *Comedy* finds expression in the unique stylistic devices Dante poet employs. These devices one may describe as a theological grammar of perception. A theological grammar of perception is that register of perception by which an author conveys the abstract in concrete terms by bringing to mind something that the senses can perceive. Love is one such register in the *Comedy*, the Dante scholar and theologian Vittorio Montemaggi shows, because it renders visible the abstract and invisible.<sup>24</sup> By encompassing the ontologically distinctive in embodied terms, love acts as transcendental in the *Comedy*. It visibly expresses God who is Love while simultaneously holding the human register of affection.

Love is central to Dante pilgrim's sojourning through hell, purgatory, and paradise as each volume depicts persons according to the extent that love characterised their relations. These relations, whether to self, creation or Creator, all visually express how love is manifest through the very corporeality of the persons of the *Comedy*.<sup>25</sup> In its ordering of existence, love has theological significance because it echoes the doctrinal affirmation that God created out of love, for love and through love.<sup>26</sup>

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22 A founding voice in this discourse is Janet Martin Soskice who seminal doctoral work mapped the relationship of form and content of theological writing. See Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

23 Janet Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender and Religious Language*. (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 125–156, 157–180.

24 Vittorio Montemaggi, "In Unknowability as Love: The Theology of Dante's *Commedia*," in Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (eds.), *Dante's *Commedia*: Theology as Poetry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 60–62.

25 Montemaggi, "In Unknowability as Love," 70–71.

26 Julian of Norwich, *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Barry Windeatt. Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.



God's creative act of love expresses God's desire to commune with persons, and to have persons respond, in turn, to such love by living in loving relation to self, other and divine. Responding to the love by which God creates is accepting love as the condition for all other relationality. The logic of love as the logic of relationality, Christ sets out in Mark 12:30–32 as the second greatest command. This Dominical command not only affirms that love orders existence, but also that the corporeality of existence is the means by which such love finds expression. Loving others is not then the keeping of Christ's command alone, it is also the physical enactment of the relational existence for which God has created persons.

Since God creates as an expression of God's love, and since that creative act culminates in the materiality of existence, the created order is good. Responding to God's love by loving others – and this is key – is affirming such goodness.<sup>27</sup> It is loving self and others with the understanding that one's materiality is as much part of God's expression as the love that founds such expression.

In the *Comedy*, the extent to which persons accepted relationality and the goodness of the created order as expression of the love (the divine gift) that orders their existence, is the extent to which they are depicted in “wholistic” terms.<sup>28</sup> For example, if a character in the *Comedy* lived a life that was characterised by love and the acceptance of the materiality of existence as means of responding to such love, that person is visually depicted in terms that speak of reconciliation, restoration and beatification. Those who rejected love and their bodily conditions as means of experiencing and

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27 Janet Martin Soskice, “Creation and the Glory of Creatures.” *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (2013): 181–5.

28 In contradistinction to the term ‘holistic’, wholistic incorporates a fundamentally African conception of the self. This conception often goes hand in hand with the doctrine of salvation, as Gerrit Brand's *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost* suggests. See Gerrit Brand, *Speaking of a Fabulous Ghost: In Search of Theological Criteria, with Special Reference to the Debate on Salvation in African Christian Theology* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2002), 91ff. When Mercy Oduyoye speaks of the vision of salvation in terms of wholeness, she speaks of healing in terms of the oppressive forces that pervade various sectors of the African women's life in light of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Wholeness here denotes one's existence in terms of the whole, but also, as participating in the vision of the new creation that Christ establishes. See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Calling the Church to Account: African Women and Liberation.” *The Ecumenical Review* 47, no. 4 (1995): 482.

expressing that love, visually represent sorrow, despair, and loss. In both instances, the visual depiction of persons mimetically performs the extent to which love characterised their relations.

The persons whom Dante's pilgrim meets in the *Comedy* thus all have a story to tell. Many if not all the persons whom he meets, show the nature of their stories in bodily terms. *Inferno* Canto xx, as we shall see, depicts bodies in grotesque ways – where the bodies of the soothsayers are twisted, mangled and tears are streaming down their backs. In *Purgatorio*, bodies are grasping, relentlessly seeking the restoration of right-relations. Their bodies begin to bear the marks of restoration and reconciliation. Bodies in *Paradiso*, finally, are beatific and characterised by the love that perfects their being. The lives that persons led, and the extent to which love ordered those relations, the *Comedy* visually depicts in the forms that the aerial bodies take.<sup>29</sup>

The relationship between the body, theology, and the *Comedy*, one may argue, lies therein that bodies act as signposts of love (or its absence) in Dante's sojourning. The persons whom Dante pilgrim meets all express the relative presence or absence of right relations (loving relations) in the way that they are portrayed. Dante-poet's body, Dante-pilgrim's body, and the bodies of those with whom he interacts, thus together constitute the unique aesthetic that the *Comedy* advances. It does so by visually depicting, through the persons of the *Comedy* and the nature of their relations, the truth that Dante speaks.<sup>30</sup>

The *Comedy* invites the reader to partake in its poetic narration by perceiving the bodies of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, and by interpreting the embodied circumstance of such characters in terms of the reader's own existence. The body in this way, is central to perception because it serves as communicative key in the *Comedy*. Bodies not only visually depict the state of relations between persons, they also communicate the extent to

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29 The bodies of the *Comedy* are aerial bodies, spirited beings whose existence marks the same grammar of perception as material bodies in life. Heather Webb describes them as “[t]he aerial body is a constitutive mechanism for our continued human personhood after death, just as the embryonic body and infused soul are constitutive of our humanity at birth.” See Webb, *Dante's Persons*, 17.

30 Vittorio Montemaggi, “Contemplation, Charity and Creation Ex Nihilo in Dante's *Commedia*.” *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (2013): 72.

which persons while alive accepted or rejected the body and its relational existence. Notably then, the body is the register through which the sense-perceptual self perceives the divine in the *Comedy*. The body is, therefore, neither subsidiary in the perception of the divine nor secondary to the intellect, mind, or imaginative will. The body constitutes the material condition and register by which the self perceives.

The body uniquely represents the theological grammar of perception (love) that Dante-poet employs by visually enacting the relative presence or absence of love articulated in the relation of self, to divine and other. The body hereby performs the transcendental by making visible the truth that Dante speaks concerning persons and the embodied relations to which they are called as an expression of the *imago Dei*.<sup>31</sup> In the *Comedy*, bodies like words, make visible the invisible by visually depicting, through the persons of the *Comedy* and the nature of their relations, the truth that Dante speaks. This truth is not an abstracted truth, but a truth expressed in word, symbol, and performance.

### ***Infernal bodies***

In the visual representation of persons according to their acceptance or rejection of the love that orders existence, the *Comedy* bears its own truth. One manner of uncovering this truth is by tending to the visual depiction of the persons of *Inferno* and the way that Dante responds to them. In Canto xx verses 1–18 of *Inferno*, one reads of the soothsayers:

I saw there people circling round that trench.  
 And on they came in silence, weeping still –  
 as slow in pace as litanies on earth.  
 Then, as my gaze sank lower down these forms,  
 each was revealed (the wonder of it all!)  
 twisted around between the chin and thorax.  
 The face of each looked down towards its coccyx.

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31 Montemaggi, “In Unknowability as Love,” 87.

And each, deprived of vision to the front,  
 came, as it must, reversed along its way.  
 Seized by its paralytic fit, others  
 perhaps have been so turned awry. But I –  
 not having seen, myself – don't credit it.  
 That God may grant you, as you read, the fruit  
 that you deserve in reading, think, yourselves:  
 could I have kept my own face dry, to see,  
 close by, that image of our human self  
 so wrenched from true that teardrops from the eyes  
 ran down to rinse them where the buttocks cleave?<sup>32</sup>

The persons whom Dante as pilgrim and the reader meet are persons who, in prayer-like litany, walk in circles.<sup>33</sup> The sight of the processors is so distressing that Dante himself weeps (or so the reader and Virgil initially think). Robin Kirkpatrick shows, however, that the compassion which Dante feels is not for the contorted bodies of the false prophets, but for the destructive effects that sins committed against the body has (i.e. rejecting the body as the expression of the Creator's divine intention, and thereby the Love that orders such existence).<sup>34</sup> He writes, "Dante is not empathizing with the sinners. He is, rather, horrified at how seriously the sins of the mind can damage the integrity and goodness of human identity, in physical as well as spiritual form".<sup>35</sup> The error the soothsayers thus make is to assume that the mind can transcend its own materiality by trying to realise that which is unknowable and beyond their reach.<sup>36</sup>

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32 Alighieri, *Inferno*, 390.

33 Kirkpatrick in Alighieri, *Inferno*, 390.

34 Kirkpatrick in Alighieri, *Inferno*, 390.

35 Kirkpatrick in Alighieri, *Inferno*, 390.

36 See Kirkpatrick's notes in Alighieri, *Inferno*, 389.

In Dante's tears lies the logic that bodies are visual corollaries of various states of relation. The grotesque image of the processors with their heads positioned the wrong way around, visually depicts how the body suffers when it is rejected as the means by which persons are defined in relation to others.<sup>37</sup> Dante-pilgrim thus perceives the loss of condition of the processor as a result of their desire to transcend their bodily conditions,<sup>38</sup> and decries this loss.<sup>39</sup> The act of mourning the denial of the corporeal as the means by which persons engage in the world, exist in relation to others, and live as an expression of love, is prophetic. Dante-pilgrim here acts as prophet because his tears show, by way of negation, what could be the case (i.e. beatific relations and so to embrace the future as exactly the bodily and its continued founding in God). When Dante thus weeps at the sight of the processors, he weeps for the soothsayers for whom the corporeal and earthly were not enough and for whom capturing the perfection of right relations meant escaping the materiality of their existence.

Dante-pilgrim's weeping echoes the weeping of the processors and thereby juxtaposes his realisation of the love that orders existence, and their failure to realise and respond to such love. His weeping is a form of witnessing that visually performs the invisible loss of condition that marks an existence characterised by the refusal of the love that orders existence. Tears, Aïda Muluneh says, are "a sententious reference in the prosaic tastes of medieval art, it always appears with the sense of 'crying', 'manifesting sufferance with tears.'"<sup>40</sup> Although separated by centuries, the contemporary Ethiopian artist Aïda Muluneh captures the omnipresence of weeping as an act of attesting in her artistic interpretation of the processors. For her, the idea of "sufferance with" marks a fundamental part of Muluneh's Series 99, where weeping is a witnessing of and a participating in.<sup>41</sup>

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37 See Kirkpatrick's notes in Alighieri, *Inferno*, 390.

38 See Kirkpatrick's comments in Alighieri, *Inferno*, 390.

39 "This," Muluneh continues, "coincides with the trials of love, the sign of the poet's painful folding in the face of love impracticable within an earthly dimension." See Aïda Muluneh, 2014. 'Inferno, Series 99,' in *The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists*, 302–3.

40 See Muluneh in Njami, *The Divine Comedy*, 350.

41 See Muluneh, "Inferno, Series 99," 350.

When asked about her choice for the artistic representation of *Inferno*, canto xx, Muluneh draws on her own witnessing in the Ethiopian context. She writes, “... living in this city we call Addis Ababa, we don’t need to fantasise about going to the *Inferno* – I have seen and experienced enough things to really make me question humanity.”<sup>42</sup> Muluneh, by interpreting Dante’s *Comedy* for herself, echoes Dante’s prophetic weeping when he says: “that image of our human self so wrenched from true” (*Inferno* xx, 22–23).<sup>43</sup>



In *The Series 99/Part Two* (2013) Muluneh interprets the image “so wrenched from true” of which Dante speaks.<sup>44</sup> It casts a singular subject in seven frames. Each frame expresses a different dimension of the processors in Canto xx. The model (not Muluneh herself) wears a traditional South Ethiopian cloth and has red hands and ears. Due to the white paint that conceals her particularity, the model bears a myriad of representational possibilities.<sup>45</sup> The black dots that create a vertical line from head to bust, creates a semblance of symmetry. She looks away, to that which is beyond the gaze of the spectator. Three things are noteworthy: the white paint,

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42 Muluneh in Njami, *The Divine Comedy*, 302. To the invitation to interpret and so embody, Series 99 poses a myriad of questions. Muluneh elaborates, ‘I am not here to offer answers, and I have said this in the past, I’m here to provoke the audience to ask questions ...’ See Njami, “The Secret of Eternal Life,” 29. As well as, Aïda. Muluneh, “Interview [with] Ethiopian photographer Aïda Muluneh (2017).” [Online]. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=108&v=nlb1K-55Urw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=108&v=nlb1K-55Urw).

43 Alighieri, *Inferno*, 169.

44 Aïda Muluneh, “The 99 Series (2013): <https://www.aidamuluneh.com/the-99-series-1/?fbclid=IwAR2ugOS-mprG2JTGHALzN1vzxKa8qEEF9ni6cI8l8kGsKYc65O1Xy0FMxpc>.

45 “I painted her body white because ... I have realised that in order to get ahead here, many people wear masks in order to protect their future. But while doing this, the reality is that I have seen the various atrocities and the great lengths that many will go to in order to maintain their success ... The cloth wrapped around Salem’s body is specifically from the southern region of Ethiopia, which has endured several centuries of oppression, slavery and so forth.” See Muluneh, “Inferno, Series 99,” 302.

the red hands and ears, and the cloth. The white paint makes Series 99 dialogically open by removing subjectivities such as race, class, and gender.<sup>46</sup> The third red hand that frames the model in Series 99 visually performs how the body is a scripted entity that holds multiple identities and bears various influences. The model visually attests to the presence of life-negating forces that intrude the life of the self. The red may, therefore, be interpreted as speaking to the universal nature of violence, and of the bloodshed that often comes as a result of excessively seeking development and advancement.<sup>47</sup> The cloth in which the model is wrapped, finally, speaks to the cultural coding implicit to Muluneh's interpretive strategy.

One way of interpreting Muluneh's representation of the processors in *Inferno* xx is the visual depiction of the desire for upward mobility. This desire determines the future through manipulation. A manner of seeing where persons, willing to commit atrocities, skews the future by trying to control the present. The body keeps the score,<sup>48</sup> in this instance, as the need to determine the future translates viscerally as the negation of self, other, and the material condition that defines existence. The contemporary depiction of what *Inferno* xx describes as soothsayers, casts in familiar terms the destructive nature of lives that are not ordered according to the logic of love, of relationality, and of life. One may recall Robin Kirkpatrick's words in relation to canto xx, "Dante mediates on the ways in which the human mind, by its prophetic pretensions to know the unknowable, can distort our natural relationship to a particular time and place".<sup>49</sup>

The model in Series 99 holds together Dante and Muluneh's voice, and in doing so, holds together two worlds of words, and two worlds of meaning. In Muluneh's seeing as well as in Dante's seeing, both have in common a manner of speaking of the need to determine the future that is culturally coded, and both use the bodily as code by which to do so.<sup>50</sup> Muluneh and

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46 Muluneh, "In Conversation with Aïda Muluneh."

47 Muluneh, "In Conversation with Aïda Muluneh."

48 Bessel van der Kolk coins this phrase in his book, Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

49 Kirkpatrick in Alighieri, *Inferno*, 390.

50 Muluneh, "In Conversation with Aïda Muluneh."

Dante's works are thus visual diaries of a personal history.<sup>51</sup> Even though they produced their works centuries apart, both attest to the manifold ways in which bodies visually present the relative presence or absence of right relations. The processors of *Inferno* xx visually depict, in their attempt to transcend the body and its corporality, the failure to perceive the goodness of the created order.

What the infernal bodies express, Dante makes visible through his weeping and Muluneh interprets in Series 99. The posture of weeping represented in both speaks to the ways in which persons fail to see the body as a means of coming to know the divine. Persons perceive the divine when they understand their relation between self and other as a visual representation of the love that founds their existence. The love that is made incarnate through their relations speaks of a God who exists as three persons in unity, and who desires to commune with persons. With the refusal of this logic comes a failure of the senses; a failure to see God in the everyday and a failure to see God in the extraordinary.

Both Muluneh and Dante recover the senses by poetically and visually placing them as central to the depiction of self in relation to others. By calling the senses to memory in the relation between human and divine, Muluneh and Dante not only hold in their mind an image, they also embody it, and so take part sense-perceptually in the love that orders existence. Both recover the body by bringing into focus the theological depths of the *Comedy* displayed in Dante's weeping and interpreted in Muluneh's Series 99. Both Muluneh and Dante-pilgrim attest to a manner of seeing that measures the reality of the processors against the beatific *telos* of persons.

Insofar as Series 99 visually depicts the result of the breakdown of relations, it too makes visible that which is manifestly absent and yet present to canto xx, the dignity, and perfection of right relations. To be in right relation to another, is to manifest the love and beauty which is the ground of all existence. It is to visibly sign forth the ground of all that is in terms of a corporal speech. Here, Series 99 renders a theological interpretation of the

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51 Muluneh, "In Conversation with Aida Muluneh."



Comedy, for love is arguably the defining point of Dante's creative writing.<sup>52</sup> In its effecting of the love and beauty which orders existence, Series 99 like the Comedy, acts as a gateway; the image cast in time, signs to the eternal image which the created order bears.

When asked about the nature of her seeing, Muluneh describes love as the defining point of her art.<sup>53</sup> To make art is, for Muluneh, to praise the divine. Muluneh's performative art one may, thus, interpret as an act whereby symbols and artefacts announce the presence of the invisible in the visible. The strength in Series 99's communicative potential lies in what is absent, or at least not manifestly present, namely, the potential of living in perfect relation to self, other and divine.

Dante and Muluneh perform the vision that the *Comedy* advances of restored and perfected relations through their respective performances of weeping. Notably, weeping signals to the reader the importance of Dante and Muluneh's seeing, and the role that it plays in signing to that which is only present by way of absence. Weeping performs a certain manner of seeing that discerns the ideal at the hand of the real. This is because tears bring into relief a contra-narrative that speaks of the perfection of right relations.

## Dante and Muluneh's apophaticism

One register of bearing witness to the *telos* of person is mourning or weeping. With his invocation, "could I have kept my own face dry, to see, / close by, that image of our human self / so wrenched from true that teardrops from the eyes / ran down to rinse them where the buttocks cleave,"<sup>54</sup> Dante solicits no answer. The assumption is that no one would be able to resist responding to the sight of denigrated bodies. When the reader imagines an existence apart from the bodily circumstances that makes them who they are, they experience an onslaught of the senses. This is because a person exists as a complex structure made up of various matrices

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52 In the creation of art, Aïda Muluneh suggests, love is a similar driving force. Muluneh, "In Conversation with Aïda Muluneh."

53 Muluneh, "In Conversation with Aïda Muluneh."

54 Canto xx, 19–24 in Alighieri, *Inferno*, 169.

of relation which,<sup>55</sup> when divorced from the embodied circumstances in which it exists as a person, suffers.

Dante pilgrim's rhetorical move makes the theological statement that persons have dignity and that they, as sense-perceptual selves, exist in likeness of Christ. As bearers of God's image, persons exist as a micro-cosmos dialogically open to others,<sup>56</sup> and take part in a macro-cosmos, the body of Christ, founded in love. Christ affirms this likeness in the incarnation where he assumes the materiality of existence with the purpose of restoring and perfecting the senses. What Christ thus does for the sense-perceptual self in the incarnation, is that He clothes the senses with a new grammar of perception. This grammar of perception is Christo-form and participates in the vision of the goodness of the created order that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* expresses.

When Dante asks the reader whether they could behold the processors and not weep, he elicits their response. By now, the reader should understand that existing as a sense-perceptual self is responding to the Love that orders existence. Responding to such love in turn testifies, or confesses, that creation bears the image of its Creator. In terms of the incarnation, Christ, by embodying the union of human and divine, images the new creation that God desires for the created order. Weeping with Dante at the sight of the grotesque infernal bodies means having the senses are transformed, beatified so to speak, by acknowledging the perfection to which persons are called and which Christ embodies. Sight itself, first of the grotesque, and later of beatific relations, gestures to the perfected relations that Christ embodies. That the Dante-pilgrim sees, is one key marker by which the reader comes to understand the indwelling of God in the embodied relations of the *Comedy*. In distinction to the seeing of the false prophets in a manner that is contrary to the logic of love, Dante sees the *telos* of persons in terms of their individual and collective relation to others.

Dante's literary and visual strategies are one way that a Christological foregrounding occurs in the *Comedy*.<sup>57</sup> The *Comedy* hereby becomes, as John

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55 Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, 86–91.

56 Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, 86–91.

57 Vittorio Montemaggi, 2005. "Nulla Vedere E Amor Mi Costrinse": On Reading Dante's 'Commedia' as a Theological Poem." PhD Diss. Cambridge University, 41–62.

Took suggests, “a discourse at every point taking seriously the indwelling of the Godhead ... whereby the essential enters into the existential as the leading parameter of human experience.”<sup>58</sup> As *the* paradigm of existence where essential meets existential,<sup>59</sup> Christ incarnate is centre stage in the relation of self and other to which Dante-pilgrim witnesses in his sojourning.

In the characteristic visual presentation of love through persons, the *Comedy* displays cataphatic and apophatic impulses.<sup>60</sup> The cataphatic impulses relate to the visual depiction of the *telos* of persons, namely, perfected relations with self, other and divine. These persons, through their aerial bodies, positively affirm the loving nature of God, and thereby come to express a divine truth. The apophatic impulses of the *Comedy* relate to those bodies of *Purgatorio* and *Inferno* that yearn for reconciliation, restoration, and transformation. These bodies illustrate a myriad of absences including the absence of right relations, the absence of the affirmation of the goodness of the created order, and the absence of the realisation of the love that governs all existence. Here, divine truths find their expression through negation but pertain as much to God as to persons.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

The relationship between Word and words, and form and content in the *Comedy* provides new insights into how one may participate in a realised vision of beatific relations. Dante poetically and Mulneh visually expresses this dynamic when they make visible the invisible.<sup>62</sup> They do so

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58 John Took, “Dante’s Incarnationalism: An Essay in Theological Wisdom.” *Italian Studies* LXI, no. 1 (2006): 17.

59 Took, “Dante’s Incarnationalism,” 17.

60 Montemaggi, “In Unknowability as Love,” 62.

61 See Willie James Jennings, “He Became Truly Human: Incarnation, Emancipation, and Authentic Humanity.” *Modern Theology* 12, no. 2 (1996): 242. The article by Willie James Jennings is instructive in that Jennings expands on the nature of theological truth when it pertains, especially, to persons and their relation to the divine. He calls this form of apophatic discoursing, apophatic anthropology.

62 When asking Mulneh about these forms, and the philosophy behind its use, Mulneh warns that she seeks to resist abstractions. See Mulneh, “In Conversation with Aida Mulneh.”

by re-membling (that is, reconstituting the image of the divine through visual reconstruction) the truth that the *Comedy* speaks. Dante pilgrim's visceral response to the processors and Muluneh's choice to represent these processors through bodily reproduction points to the fecundity of the body as interpretative lens. A reading of the *Comedy* with an emphasis on the sense-perceptual yields a comprehensive, and yet, intricately intertwined understanding of the self. One that, as this contribution has tried to show, is not unfamiliar to the *Comedy*.

Reading the body, theology, and the *Comedy* in conversation with another, is not to superimpose a theological agenda onto Dante's poem, but rather to bring into relief such existent themes that resonate with a Christian understanding of existence in the presence of the divine. These themes, Muluneh's Series 99 suggests, mark persons as always existing at various intersections. For this reason, any understanding of the self in relation to other that rests on binaries or mutually exclusive relationships, is fraught with dangers. One might argue that the soothsayers of *Inferno* xx fell into such danger in that they prioritised the spiritual over the material and in doing so, denied the role that corporeality has in performing God's good will for creation. As testament to the damaging effect of the negation of the body, the bodies of *Inferno* xx are unsightly.

In the negative depiction of the state of persons who misapprehended love as an expression of the divine, an apophaticism arises. One that speaks of the place of persons within the relation of human and divine, and one which anchors that relation in the material and created order. In its nugatory style, *Inferno* xx gestures to the vision of perfected relations in *Paradiso*. The vision of perfected relations, in accordance with the visual register we have highlighted thus far, casts beatific relations in bodily terms. Significantly, the created order is present to the depiction of such relations. For example, *Paradiso* xxx depicts beatific relations in creational terms when Dante-pilgrim sees the court of Heaven (where all the blessed reside) shaped in the form of a rose. *Paradiso* xxx visually performs for the reader in its embodiment of a new creation where persons are held in the everlasting repose that is the love of God.

The vision that the *Comedy* advances is thus always a matter of both and; of the representation of persons and the created order in the vision of beatific

relations. While one might get the impression that the *Comedy* captures paradise in utopian terms, a theological vision of reconciled relations speaks of a new creation. In this new creation persons remain defined by their corporeality, and the cosmic matrix of relations in which they exist. Participating in this vision of a new creation starts with the affirmation that the time, space, and context in which one functions already forms part of a cosmic reality that is founded and governed by the Trinity. Christ incarnate foregrounds existence in the flesh by bringing persons into union with himself, and the Spirit continuously actualises the Christo-centric existence of persons in this flesh.

God continuously founds the cosmic existence of persons through creation *ex nihilo* and incarnation; two moments of God's acting in a relational way, and out of love. When encountering creation *ex nihilo* as God's declaration of the goodness of the created order, one understands the incarnation as the perfection of such goodness in the corporeality of existence. The created order is, therefore, as much part of God's bringing to fulfilment his vision of new creation through the incarnation, as persons are.

When one understands that persons are integrally part of the created order, Dante's *Comedy* provides a vision of a theology that comes from below. His vision of beatific relations is one that invites the reader to incarnate the love that orders existence through their own existing in relation to creation and Creator. Persons can, hereby, find articulations of God's presence manifest in a person's weeping, in the beauty of creation, and in the loving relations between self and other. They are to do so by celebrating life and its day to day incarnation of the God who is Love. The *Comedy* speaks its truths through a theological grammar of perception borne from below, that is, from the materiality of existence and the vision of its perfection in Father, Son and Spirit.

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