

Foreword

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The publication of this book was not deliberately planned but evolved and grew with the enthusiasm of two young Dante scholars, Dr Anita Virga and Dr Sonia Fanucchi, who were intent on enriching their postgraduate students' experience of reading Dante. The response to their exhortation to the students to consider the relevance of Dante's work to their lives and experiences was as unexpected as it was inspirational. The project took on a life of its own.

I am thus delighted to have the opportunity to write the foreword to *A South African Convivio with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the Commedia*. As a former head of the School of Literature, Language, and Media at the University of the Witwatersrand, from whence this book emanates, I am proud to be associated with a project which has proved to be an intense journey full of personal and theoretical insights for students and academics alike.

The project captures the spirit of experimentation in teaching and learning, and research, with which my colleagues at Wits University are responding to calls for the decolonisation of universities and the curriculum. The *#FeesMustFall* movement which began in 2015 was focused on free university education, but it had a far wider ideological imprint, locating itself within debates on the role of the university *for students and society* and calling for a radical re-imagination and transformation of the university. What the movement, together with its precursor, *#RhodesMustFall*, signalled was the need for a fundamentally different university, one with which students (but also academics and workers) could identify and in which they could recognise themselves—a university radically re-imagining its ideological identity post colonialism and post liberation. Rad-

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Sonia Fanucchi, Anita Virga (edited by), *A South African Convivio with Dante. Born Frees' Interpretations of the Commedia*, © 2021 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-458-8 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-458-8

ical change can mean changing everything—total disruptive displacement—which is unlikely to occur without a full-scale revolution, or it can mean gradual but incremental transformative change through the integration of different approaches, as we see here.

This book signals to us that the postcolonial university is within our reach, that progress can be made in leaps and bounds. The book's publication shows that the adoption of decolonising practices in teaching and learning and research places us at the threshold of the decolonial. The ambition of “developing a South African narrative around Dante—of determining in what sense Dante ‘speaks’ to us as South African readers and whether we might build a community of scholars, students and writers with this shared vision” demonstrates how academics and students can rise to the challenge of changing the university.

The performance of writing back to Dante showcased here is an exciting combination of decolonising practice and of translation informed by the practice of reading through different epistemological paradigms. At the very heart of the *Convivio with Dante* lies a classic of mediaeval literature—in translation (and only tangentially in the original). Although the issue of translation as such never seems to have entered the picture (students were free to use any Dante edition in translation), the students nonetheless engaged in a process of translation and transformation—a form of rewriting and translanguaging producing, what I would like to call, *transwriting*.

The students take charge of the text, using their conversation with Dante to uncover their singular identities, whether through resistance to the text or through recognition of themselves in the text. Their writing takes hold of our imagination. Through their eyes we see a different *Purgatorio*, a different Dante, more akin to our times.

Dante seems to speak directly to their strengths as well as their anxieties, and to their social and political worlds. The reader is taken on an exhilarating, at times horrifying, journey with the students. Their moral philosophies spill over enthusiastically, carrying the reader with them on their Dantesque journeys – which are likely to be as revelatory and salutary for the reader as they were for the students and their academic guides.

The book is a wonderfully successful experiment in enhancing the value of a formidable literary work, often seen by many as irrelevant and as divorced from our immediate and current experiences. This book is proof that that is not the case.