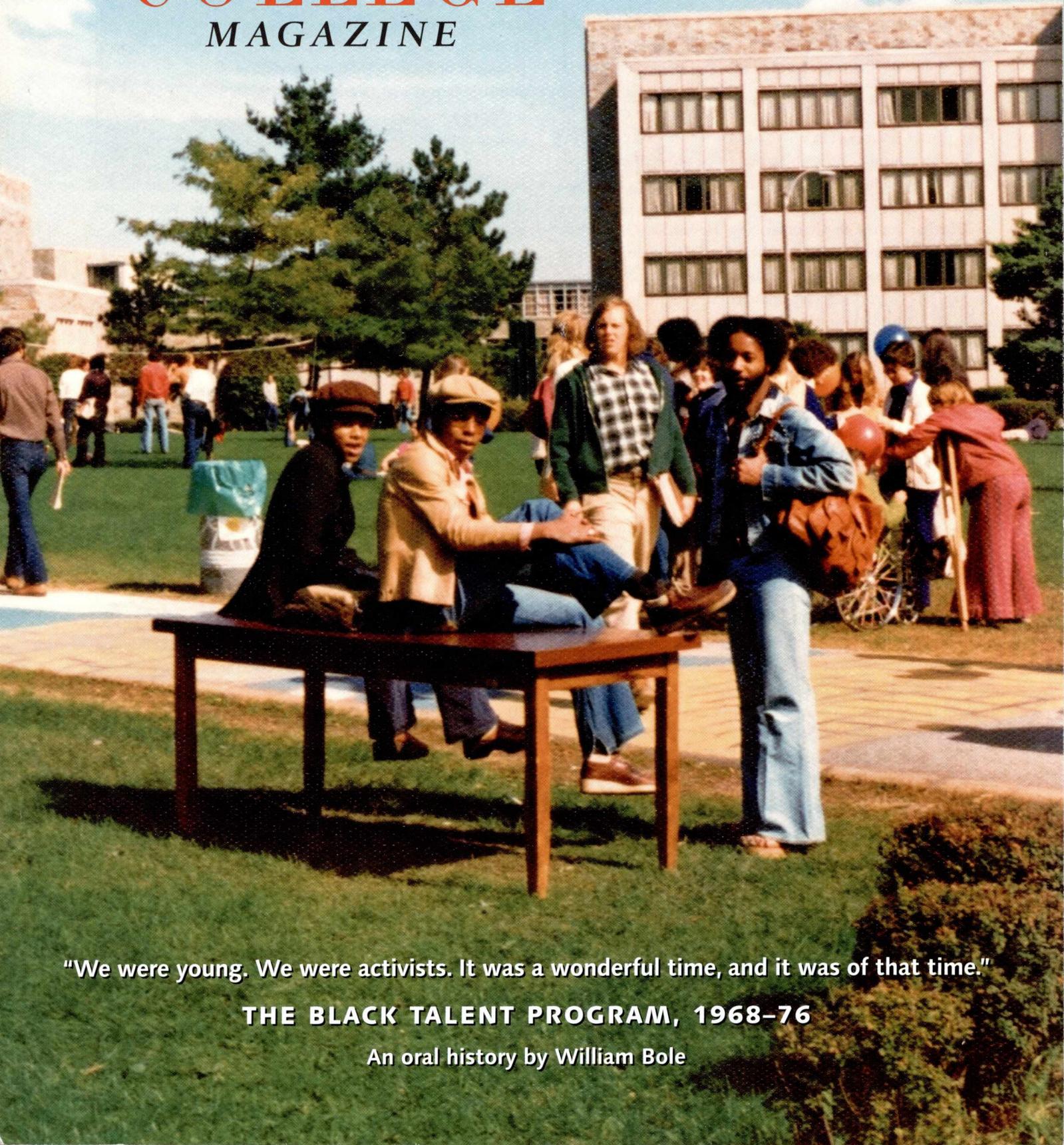


# BOSTON COLLEGE

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## MAGAZINE



"We were young. We were activists. It was a wonderful time, and it was of that time."

**THE BLACK TALENT PROGRAM, 1968-76**

An oral history by William Bole



Dante and Beatrice ascending

# Pleasure trip

by Clare Dunsford

Nine years to heaven's gates

The 33rd and last canto of Dante Alighieri's *Purgatorio* begins with the sound of women weeping, but for the exuberant group of readers in Devlin 101 on a January night, it will end with the pop of a cork. Kisses and bits of Italian fill the air as people filter into the room, and six bottles of prosecco wait on a table alongside the podium at the front.

This is the 10th year of *Lectura Dantis*, a public reading of the *Divine Comedy*, conducted at the rate of one canto a month during the academic year. It is perhaps the longest running *Lectura Dantis* in the country at present, having begun at Boston College in February 2000 with *Inferno*. These readers have been immersed in *Purgatorio* since November 2004. They expect to complete the third and last section, *Paradiso*, in February 2013. In a world with the attention span of a sound bite, those who gather for 13 years to read a medieval Italian poet are few in number (33 by my count on this night).

Tonight's lecturer is Franco Mormando, a professor in the University's Romance languages and literatures department. A handsome man with a Roman nose and salt-and-pepper beard, he approaches his task as an explicator. "I was determined to erase all mysteries," he declares, but "in the end, while we are on this side of the river that separates us from Eternity, mystery will remain."

Mormando is making his fourth appearance as a presenter to the group; for him, one of the pleasures of Dante is delving into the textual knots, much as one would enjoy a crossword puzzle. A notorious knot is the reference to a "five hundred and ten and five" who will redeem the corrupt Catholic Church and Italy some day; the Roman numerals DXV can be rearranged to look like "Dux," Latin for leader, Mormando says, although some scholars approach puzzles like this one by recourse to *gematria*, a code between letters and numbers used in

Hebrew mystical literature. Scholars following this thread translate the number as a trumpet's blast, a reference to the Last Judgment. To illustrate this method, Mormando points to the blackboard where a coded message is printed and asks, "Can anyone figure out the words?" "Elvis Presley," a woman calls out. "Yes!" he shouts. She wins a bottle of prosecco.

A running joke tonight is Mormando's distaste for Beatrice, Dante's beloved and his guide through some of purgatory and on into Paradise. "Beatrice becomes more human here, thank God," Mormando exclaims to this group of regulars. "Some of you know how I feel about Beatrice." As he explains the canto's cruxes, Mormando points out what will be the poem's last reference to the sun as a means of telling time; there is no time in Paradise.

Not just a puzzle, Canto 33 is also poetry, Mormando reminds the audience. The poem sounds beautiful even if we don't understand it all. With that, he introduces a slender young woman, an Italian graduate student with what Mormando calls a "natural gift for reading Dante." With downcast eyes and gentle voice, she reads the canto in exquisite Italian, six or seven delightful minutes for her time-bound listeners.

The first question that follows the presentation is from a bald man with glasses who defends Beatrice: She is tender toward Dante, he says, as she urges him to come to her side early in the canto ("her eyes had struck my eyes," Dante writes, "and gazing tranquilly, 'Pray come more quickly,' she said to me"). When Mormando raises a contradiction with a later canto, the man retorts, "We'll cross that canto when we come to it!" Another man asks, "Can you tell us why you don't like Beatrice?" "Yes," Mormando says firmly, "because in the wonderful moment of reunion"—in Canto 30, which the group read last September—"Beatrice's first words are strident and scolding, like a schoolmarm's."

Another audience member suggests that Dante, who lost his mother at an early age, created a fantasy in Beatrice. As so often during this evening, the comments are literal and personal, as delicious as gossip. Not at all like an academic lecture, tonight's meeting has more the feel of a

joyous sacred ritual, even down to the wine, which is uncorked after the discussion concludes, to celebrate leaving purgatory, or at least its poetic embodiment.

EXACTLY ONE MONTH LATER, THIS band of devotees gathers again in Devlin, to enter Paradise. Laurie Shepard, a professor of Romance languages and literatures, cheerfully introduces the evening's lecturer, Emilio Mazzola, a teacher at Newton North High School and her cofounder in the *Lectura* enterprise. He notes, on this freezing cold night, that this is not paradisiacal weather. Dante chose as his own moment of entry April 13, 1300.

*Paradiso*, Mazzola points out, while one of the greatest poetic compositions of all time, is probably among the least read of them. He speculates that we identify with the freedom of choice evidenced in the first two books of the *Commedia*; the concept of Paradise, however, is foreign. As if to make eternity more familiar, Mazzola names some modern fantasies—Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*, George Lucas's *Star Wars*—where characters travel at the speed of light and never age, and everyone speaks his or her own language yet that language is understood. So we come to *Paradiso*, says Mazzola, ready to take a leap into infinity, “to go where no man has gone before.” The audience chuckles at the *Star Trek* reference.

Now Mazzola, a rapid English speaker with an Italian accent, launches into a dazzling description of the cosmology of Paradise, based on the Ptolemaic system of the heavens that Dante knew. This lecture is much harder to follow than the previous one on *Purgatorio* 33; as Mazzola had intimated it would be and Dante himself declared, “*Trasumanar significar per verba non si poria*”: “Passing beyond the human cannot be worded.”

The poet labors to describe his experience, relying on a continuous flow of imagery; Mazzola announces that he has counted 13 similes (“12 if you don't count one that is used twice”) in this 142-line canto. Recalling last month's discussion, he examines the simile Dante employs when Beatrice gazes at him, with “a sigh of pity”—“the same look a mother casts upon a raving child,” writes Dante. “Bitchy Beatrice” has turned caring, Mazzola com-

ments to his listeners. She “has become the Beatrice that we knew before the last few cantos.”

As Mazzola reads the canto in Italian, the custom at these evenings, the rise and fall of his voice brings a suspension of time. Afterward, an elderly man with a quavering voice declares, “What a wonderful introduction to Paradise.” It's unclear whether he means Mazzola's bravura performance or the canto itself. Mazzola remarks, “Last month as we sipped the wine, I think that we were relieved of some burden, leaving purgatory.”

A spirited discussion breaks out about the last lines of the canto, which seem to dredge up an old conundrum: free will versus divine omniscience. “There's no solution to that problem, nor is there here,” remarks one man ruefully. “Stuff happens because it happens,” says another, while a third participant adds, in a more lofty

discourse: “Such a Virgilian sadness—this glorious beginning ends with sin and our mortal woe.”

“Dante always has one eye on earth as he's struggling through space,” says Mazzola. “Earth never really disappears.” Even entering Paradise, it seems, Dante's position is the same: still in the dark, still being schooled, alternately chided and indulged, by his Beatrice. Perhaps it's not a bad place to be—where the path points upward, where occasionally puzzles fall into place, and, best of all, where the guide is beloved and we have some company along the way. ■

Clare Dunsford is an associate dean of the College of Arts & Sciences and the author of *Spelling Love with an X: A Mother, a Son, and the Gene that Binds Them* (2007). The talks by Mormando and Mazzola may be viewed in full at [bc.edu/frontrow](http://bc.edu/frontrow).

## Marshall plans

Kuong Ly '08 and Robert J. Kubala '09 are among the 40 U.S. recipients of this year's Marshall Scholarships. Commemorating Secretary of State George C. Marshall and the post-World War II redevelopment program for Europe that bears his name, the award was created in 1953 by an act of the British Parliament and provides for two years of graduate study in the United Kingdom. Past recipients include Supreme Court justice Stephen Breyer and *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. Thomas Kempa '04 was the most recent Boston College Marshall Scholar.

Ly (right) graduated with a major in philosophy and minors in studio art and in faith, peace, and justice. He was selected to the 2008 *USA Today* All-USA College Academic First Team and received the Edward H. Finnegan, SJ, Award, the highest honor presented to a graduating senior by Boston College. Born in a refugee camp in Vietnam and now a resident of Massachusetts, Ly has been working for Health Care for All, a Boston-based consumer advocacy group. He wants to “focus on relief policy and human rights law in a holistic way, putting all the pieces together and seeing how various issues affect one another.” He will spend next year at the University of Essex Human Rights Centre and then pursue migration studies at Oxford University.

Kubala, a philosophy major with a particular interest in the relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences, is a member of the Boston College Presidential Scholars Program and the College of Arts & Sciences Honors Program. He served as senior editor at Boston College's undergraduate essay journal, *Dialogue*. Twice the recipient of advanced study awards—taking him to Germany and then Iceland—the Texas native will study philosophy, first at St. Andrews University in Scotland for a year and then at Cambridge University.

—Thomas Cooper

