

A NON-ITALIAN DANTE IN 2021: SENEGAL, U.S.A., U.K.

HEATHER WEBB, University of Cambridge

This essay seeks to raise questions about the transnational shape of Dante celebrations in 2021 and to consider the different ways in which this centenary was articulated beyond Italy. The essay first provides a brief overview of the series of initiatives pushed out to the world from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the 2021 Centenary, and second, the essay discusses a small number of initiatives that took place beyond Italy, in the UK, the US, and Senegal. These artistic initiatives range from ballet to poetry to painting and sculpture. In each case, the artists in question take up Dante in the 2021 Centenary as a source for new work that does not locate Italy as its point of reference.

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If the centenary celebrations of 1865 and 1921 took a decidedly nationalistic tack on Dante's legacy, 2021 promised new, broader horizons for thinking Dante without borders. The present essay seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions of the transnational shape of Dante celebrations in 2021 and to consider some of the ways in which this centenary was articulated beyond Italy. Pandemic conditions cut in two directions, limiting movement but liberating virtual participation. In academic and in public spheres beyond Italy, Dante's legacy is articulated as both foreign and domestic. Billed as the poet of patriotism, of hope, of freedom, of human connection, Dante is, potentially, ever more available around the world.

I will trace out two modes of taking up Dante outside Italy in the brief account that follows. First, I will provide a quick overview of the series of initiatives pushed out to the world from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the 2021 Centenary, focusing particularly on the stated conviction that the centenary celebrations of Dante would promote a particular vision of Italy. Second, I will consider a small number of initiatives that took place beyond Italy, showing how these artistic projects instead take Dante in the Centenary as a productive source for new work that does not locate Italy as its point of reference. What I offer here is no way

comprehensive, and takes as its focus a limited sample of work that is particularly salient for a consideration of artistic work that enacts affective reception of Dante's *Comedy* by understanding that work as a locally-embedded text, without reference to Italy as its point of origin.

There are various summaries of initiatives around the world for 2021, and I would refer readers to Matteo Maselli's report for *Bibliotheca Dantesca* for one excellent example.¹ Natascia Tonelli has also reflected on the global nature of Dante celebrations in 2021 at the Congresso Internazionale Dantesco in Ravenna 2021.² The web pages of the Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale offer a vast cataloguing of centenary events around the world.³ I propose to focus on a very few instances of initiatives, for the purposes of contrasting national and international framings of the significance of celebrating Dante in 2021. To put it another way, how Italian was Dante outside of Italy in this Centenary, and what does this suggest for our work on Dante going forward?

I will begin with the series of initiatives that fell under the rubric "Dante 700 nel Mondo," promoted by the Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, a series that sought to link up the Italian embassies, consulates, and Istituti Italiani di Cultura all around the world in a set of celebrations of Dante, ranging from exhibitions of visual art to concerts to performances to multimedia experiments. This venture linked the Comitato Nazionale per le Celebrazioni del Centenario with entities like the Accademia della Crusca, the Società Dantesca, the Comune di Ravenna, the Gruppo Dante dell'Associazione degli Italianisti (ADI), and the Centro per il Libro e la Lettura (CePELL).

La Farnesina's explicit goal was "il rilancio di una nuova, forte narrazione sull'Italia al di fuori dei propri confini."⁴ This goal was scaffolded by a pragmatic one: the pandemic has deeply damaged cultural and creative institutions across sectors and these initiatives were meant to offer much-needed financial support to presses, museums, theatres, cinemas, etc. Dante in 2021 was offered

¹ Maselli, Matteo (2021) "Seven Hundred Years After Dante's Death. The Imperishable Image of an Eternal Poet," *Bibliotheca Dantesca: Journal of Dante Studies* 4 (2021). Available at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/bibdant/vol4/iss1/10>.

² Natascia Tonelli, panel 'Dante nell'anno del settimo centenario', September 15, 2021 at the Congresso Internazionale Dantesco Alma Dante 2021.

³ <https://italiana.esteri.it/italiana/progetti/dante-700-nel-mondo/>.

⁴ <https://italiana.esteri.it/italiana/progetti/dante-700-nel-mondo/> (last accessed June 22, 2023).

up to be read and interpreted in the context of today, becoming, in the words of the Ministry:

il simbolo delle sfaccettature dell'Italia di oggi, del genio che integra cultura, scienza ed economia, per dar vita al racconto di un Paese vitale e dinamico. Un racconto in cui chiunque può in parte ritrovare il proprio vissuto, grazie a manifestazioni che valorizzano il legame sempre vivo tra l'immaginario dantesco e la contemporaneità.⁵

There is much to unpack here. First, the label of genius pertains to a very specific promotional category. Alongside others like Leonardo and Michelangelo, Dante is presented as a key figure in the narration of Italy as particularly productive of these geniuses, these great minds, capable of bringing together culture and science. Dante's contribution to economic thought might appear to be more marginal, but rather than reading too much into potential valorisations of Dante's discourses on usury or counterfeit currency, I think there we are simply seeing the rhetorical results of melding the persona of Dante with Italy itself. In its presentation of a medieval poet for the carefully crafted image of contemporary Italy, Dante becomes la Farnesina's symbol of the many facets of Italy today, of the dynamism of Italy today. The explicit invitation is to link Dante's imaginary with today's Italy, to think Dante's genius as the symbol of the vitality of the country now. This is not so enormously different from framings of Dante's international importance in 1921, when Dante was held up as an "austera e grande figura" that "non domina soltanto la letteratura e l'arte nostra ma si leva come simbolo d'italianità."⁶

The Dante700 celebrations could in some way be seen as a sort of pilot of Italy's renewed investment in soft power, consolidated on the first of January 2022 with the creation of a new "Direzione generale per la Diplomazia pubblica e culturale." This new centre is tasked with maintaining dialogue with the media, research centres, universities, and international organizations, in order to promote Italy abroad with a "narrazione moderna dell'Italia, coerente con il nostro ruolo nel mondo e integrato con le forze produttive e culturali del Paese."⁷ This curated narration of Italy draws upon traditional cultural resources, as the ambassador Pasquale Terracciano puts it, in order to increase Italy's

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ F. E. "IL SESTO CENTENARIO DALLA MORTE DI DANTE." *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali e Discipline Ausiliarie* 91, no. 345 (1921): 3-5 (available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41607601>).

⁷ <https://www.rivistailmulino.it/a/investire-sul-soft-power>.

international influence and promote national interests. Dante700, as we see from the remarks by Luigi di Maio at the opening ceremonies, fits with La Farnesina's goals for nation branding. The slogan is "Italy is simply extraordinary: be IT." Like the Barilla group, with their slogan, "il nostro passato è il nostro futuro," Italy's nation branding relies on engagement with past cultural capital to speak to the present moment. Di Maio's opening comments stressed Dante again as genius, as a key to evoking what he understands as a national identity. The minister explained that culture of this sort is a resource, a source of soft power to be drawn upon for the benefit of Italy in the world.⁸

From this set of stated objectives, I will turn here to examine a few Dante centenary-linked initiatives that took place outside of Italy. In doing so, I hope we might consider what exactly was taken up in these initiatives and what role Italy's national identity might indeed have had (or not) in these varied engagements with Dante.

The first of these is Wayne McGregor's *The Dante Project*, a co-production between the Royal Ballet and the Paris Opera Ballet, with music co-commissioned with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.⁹ The initiative in this case is British, French, and American with choreography by Wayne McGregor, music by Thomas Adès, design by Tacita Dean, lighting design by Lucy Carter and Simon Binnison, with dramaturgy by Uzma Hameed. Thomas Adès's Dante came to him, as he tells it, through Dorothy Sayers's translation, and then through conversation with the artist Tacita Dean, who shared Botticelli's drawings with him. These illustrations and that conversation created another layer for Adès, who already knew the Doré illustrations. Adès subsequently found himself what he thought of as a Virgil figure in Franz Liszt, allowing the Hungarian composer to be a sort of musical analogue of Virgil for the *Inferno*. Liszt is present in Adès's *Inferno* composition in modes that range from the patent citation to the elliptical reference, but also, at some point, the staged abandonment of Liszt's orchestration, in a fitting musical adaptation of Dante's treatment of Virgil. Liszt's *Dante Symphony* and *Dante Sonata* sound through the score in a variety of ways, as varied as the ways Virgil's text sounds through Dante's.

⁸ The video of the event, with Di Maio's comments, is available at <https://italiana.esteri.it/italiana/progetti/dante-700-nel-mondo/> (last accessed June 22, 2023).

⁹ <https://waynemcgregor.com/productions/thedanteproject/>; See also <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/13/arts/dance/royal-ballet-dante-project-wayne-mcgregor.html>.

Adès says “Once I’d finished working on *Inferno*, it became hard to tell which of us the DNA came from.”¹⁰

Adès’s *Purgatorio* draws on the liturgical material of the Adès Synagogue in Jerusalem, founded in 1901 by emigrés fleeing persecution in Aleppo, Syria. An ancient form of sung prayer known as baqashot is preserved in that synagogue, sung by the hazzan (the cantor) and the congregation before dawn. Recordings of this sung prayer are present as citations in the score of Adès’s *Purgatorio*. The orchestra is invited to play with these citations or recordings, interweaving notions of homeland and exile that are also personal to the composer. The textual, musical, and visual references in the score are thus already significantly dislocated from Italy. After Botticelli, Adès worked through translations, responses, and remediations of Dante provided by Sayers, Doré, Liszt, and the Adès Synagogue.

Tacita Dean, likewise, while informed by her knowledge of Botticelli, takes William Blake as her point of departure for her *Paradise* and jacaranda trees in Los Angeles for her *Purgatory*. The set thus moves from *Inferno*’s black and white visualization of the negativities and reversals of hell to the stunning vibrant internegative of the jacaranda tree of the *Purgatory* to the abstract hypersaturation of color in *Paradise* that revisits the palette of William Blake’s 1824 watercolors.¹¹

The engagement with Dante on the part of all the artists involved in The Dante Project was committed and sustained. But in every case, that engagement, whether musically, textually, topographically, or visually, was filtered through and produced in conversation with non-Italian creative response to Dante.

To consider the effects of multiple relocated lenses on Dante’s text, I will briefly consider some American works that were highlighted on the occasion of the Centenary. The Dante Society of America’s conference “Tra liti si lontani. Dante in the Americas” held as a virtual event from 5 May to 13 May 2021, featured a conversation between the poets Kevin Young and Robin Coste Lewis, who had both been commissioned a few years earlier to write on a selection of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Thirty-Four*

¹⁰ For this account of Adès’s work with Dante, I am drawing from his account in the programme for *The Dante Project*. For another account of the varied influences in Adès’s score, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/29/arts/music/ades-dante-la-phil-review.html>.

¹¹ To see some examples see <https://www.mariangoodman.com/exhibitions/459-tacita-dean-the-dante-project-one-hundred-and-fifty/>. See also *Tacita Dean: The Dante Project*, with Briony Fer and Jennifer King (Luxembourg: Walther Koenig, 2022).

Illustrations for Dante's Inferno.¹² Young's portion of the 34 Cantos are titled "The Dark Wood" and Lewis's are "erasures" of John Ciardi's translation, titled "Dante Comes to America: 20 January 2017: An Erasure of 17 Cantos from Ciardi's Inferno, after Robert Rauschenberg."

Kevin Young put it this way in his conversation with Robin Coste Lewis: "I think of Dante as a contemporary of mine." After Rauschenberg's illustrations that "make Dante now," the poems likewise do not take Dante at a temporal distance. Questions of place, patria, or national identity do not register in these considerations. Dante is not taken as a glorious figure of the past, or of a specific land or language, but is, as Young puts it, "so urgent." He notes that Dante is "emotionally very present; invested in feelings," making him a somehow intimate interlocutor, ready to be a Virgil to Young. As Young puts it, he feels a shared witnessing with Dante, a sense that Lewis picks up to note in pandemic-inflected language, "we are all here in hell together." As Lewis speaks of taking up Dante in hard times, Young likewise professes that he feels Dante is present as a guide, as vulnerable to shock at what he sees and bears witness to, along with the poet or reader who take up his text.¹³

Both Robin Coste Lewis and Kevin Young write their poems through two mediating lenses, the translations of Dante and Rauschenberg's illustrations. The poems are engagements with both poetry and with the visual remediations of that poetry. Like Adès's score that emerges from dialogue with Lizst's engagement with Dante as well as Botticelli and Doré's illustrations, these works are the product of the entanglements of multiple visual and verbal imaginaries, over centuries and over vast geographical expanses. But often here, temporal and geographical distances are elided in a way that Dante himself prompts in his *Purgatorio*, that realm where the transmortal community asserts itself beyond the boundaries of life and death, and even, sometimes, patria. On the terrace of pride, Sapia corrects Dante's enquiry after Italians:

"O frate mio, ciascuna è cittadina
d'una vera città; ma tu vuoi dire
che vivesse in Italia peregrina" (*Purg.* 13. 94-96)

¹² The video of the conversation is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94eYy6SorBE&t=399s>.

¹³ Quotations and summaries here are based on my transcriptions of, and interpretation of, the video of the conversation made available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94eYy6SorBE&t=399s>.

And later, Statius speaks to Virgil of the ways that Virgil's words chimed, resonated with the words of the new Christian preachers Statius heard speaking around him:

“e la parola tua sopra toccata
si consonava a' nuovi predicanti,
ond'io a visitarli presi usata” (*Purg.* 22, 79-81)

These consonances beyond the limitations of place and time are what Adès, Young, and Lewis single out in their engagements with Dante. Dante's words ring out in chords with Lizst, with Rauschenberg, with the translators, with Botticelli and Doré. That which we celebrate beyond Italy is the exuberant enmeshing of Dante with other places, times, words, images, sounds, or in other words, the way that Dante becomes local, present, and affectively engaging, wherever his text is taken up.

One of the initiatives that fell under the umbrella of Dante700 nel Mondo was a series of works organized by the Istituto Italiano di Cultura a Dakar, featuring the first translation of Dante in Wolof. The work began with a translation of the first canto of the *Commedia* by the Senegalese writer Pap Khouma. Working from this translation, a collaboration between the Ravenna-based Teatro delle Albe and groups of actors in Dakar produced a performance based on a reading of Dante's poem in the banlieu of Dakar, Pikine. The Teatro delle Albe group of Ravenna, in fact, led by Marco Martinelli and Ermanna Montanari, had the ambitious theatrical project “Dante nei Cinque Continenti” set up for 2021, with planned events in New York, Nairobi, Buenos Aires, Melbourne, Jakarta.¹⁴ While not all of this journey was possible given the disruptions of the pandemic, the group did their planned work in Dakar, and has had a longstanding presence in Senegal. The Teatro delle Albe group has a now storied history in working with a multilingual relocated Dante; we might think of their work in Kibera, in Nairobi, where Martinelli involved 150 children in a production focused on the *Commedia*, transposed into the setting of Kibera, and voiced in English and Swahili.¹⁵

¹⁴ On the work of the Teatro delle Albe more broadly, see Sara Fontana, ‘Dante on Stage’ in *Dante Alive*, Francesco Ciabattini and Simone Marchesi, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2022).

¹⁵ On Marco Martinelli's film on the project, entitled *The Sky over Kibera*, Documentary, Italy, 2019, see his account <https://www.doppiozero.com/sky-over-kibera>. For further details on the film see https://www.teatrodellealbe.com/eng/sp_etta-colo.php?id=8913.

But to return to Dakar, another outcome of the work between theatre and translation in Dakar was an exhibition entitled “Sunu Dund – Nostra Vita: Seven Senegalese artists interpret the first canto of the *Commedia*,” which took place at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Dakar.¹⁶ In a sequence of striking works of painting and sculpture, artists worked with Dante’s first canto in Wolof, responding to that canto in their own place and time and in their own language. The painter Yafane (Omar Diouf), like many of the others, centred in on the articulation of gestures of accompaniment, on the guidance of Virgil and the friendship between the two poets. In a kaleidoscopic set of six pieces on plexiglass, Dante and Virgil are represented in poses of solidarity.¹⁷ Here too, along the lines of what Kevin Young described, what perdures to be engaged with as culturally present and contemporary is a sense of affect; the notion of the guiding relationship, of the sense of not being alone in witnessing.

These same gestures of companionship can also be seen in the works of Khadidiatou Sow, painter and film director.¹⁸ In Sow’s depiction, the hands of the two viewing figures are merged, an assertive positivity and touchstone beyond the swirl and tumult of figures that form the background. And again, the sense of the configuration of relation between figures is seen in the work of the sculptor, Yakhya Ba.¹⁹ In this case, the figures do not touch, but they are, as Mauro Petroni puts it, choral figures.²⁰ Their plasticity sets their tending towards one another clearly in view. The salient image that comes forth for all three of these artists in their encounter with Dante is precisely this range of gestures of taking someone by the hand, standing nearby, sharing, and facing something together.

This steady togetherness of witnessing is reminiscent of Dennis Looney’s reading in his book, *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy*, of Frances Trollope’s allusion to Dante’s *Inferno* to describe her arrival at the mouth of the Mississippi River in 1827. She writes: “I never beheld a scene so utterly desolate as this entrance of the

¹⁶ <https://www.instagram.com/explore/locations/2296055390636007/istituto-italiano-di-cultura-dakar/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXUOmJXNmiX/>.

¹⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXReBy3sF6P/>.

¹⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXJbk6qtWOw/>.

²⁰ For Petroni’s commentary see <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXReBy3sF6P/>.

Mississippi. Had Dante seen it, he might have drawn images of another Bolgia from its horrors.”²¹

It is, I would suggest, in this freedom that Dante was taken up outside of Italy in this centenary of 2021. No matter the soft power ambitions of the Farnesina, the Dante celebrated in various venues around the world was not much grounded in Italy, or defined by awe of his great genius. Dante in 2021 was instead very often found standing next to the poet, the painter, the sculptor, the dancer, gazing with them on the horrors of their local and contemporary reality. In Kibera, the children called upon Dante to judge those that abused them. Just as Dante calls out to Virgil in his poem, “vagliami ‘l lungo studio e ‘l grande amore” (*Inf*1. 83), this transmission of love out of time, beyond the boundaries of life and nation-shapes, is what lingers through remediations of remediations. Adès is struck by Lizst’s love for Dante just as Dante depicts himself struck by Statius’s love for Virgil, and Virgil’s corresponding love for Statius. As Kevin Young writes it in his poem on Rauschenberg’s *Infèrno* 5, “the dead want us to want them”; and, “when we smile the dead nod back.” It is this promise of communion with the dead that can be heard also in Pap Kouma’s translation into Wolof, in which he says that the main thing he wished to capture from Dante was rhythm, and for this he had all the gifts of African cultures of rhythm. In Wolof, he explains, rap is the rhythm with which to conjure spirits.

The cases mentioned here reveal a stark divergence from nation-branding objectives. In times of pandemic, the sense of shared witnessing of local hells, shared between the living and the dead, between the artist and Dante or someone else who loved Dante, is what came to the fore in 2021.

²¹ Dennis Looney, *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 12.