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Discussing the Divine Comedy with Dante: On Crowdsourcing and Transcultural Resonance

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Departing from the enigmatic 2006 Chinese-oil-painting-turned-digital-curio *Discussing the Divine Comedy with Dante*, this essay first defines the conceptual framework behind *Dante Today*, a crowdsourced but curated digital archive that catalogs references to Dante and his works across contemporary global cultures. Then it explains our editorial decision to employ crowdsourcing as the principal mechanism behind collection development. This choice has advantages and pitfalls. On the one hand, crowdsourcing enables the participation of large and diverse publics in collection development, engaging the "crowd" in scholarly practice. On the other hand, outsourcing collection development to the "crowd" threatens to replicate the center-periphery model that Dante's works are often accused of perpetuating. Although crowdsourcing aspires to democratize participatory heritage projects such as ours, I interrogate the limits of such claims, particularly from the perspective of transcultural and de-colonial scholarly practice. In my conclusion, I articulate our plans for future initiatives that aim to remedy this imbalance.

Keywords: Crowdsourcing, Cultural heritage, Digital archives, Public humanities, Resonance, Transculturalism

Qui la morta poesì resurga.
Purgatorio 1.7

This essay takes its title from an enigmatic oil painting created by three Chinese artists in 2006. *Discussing the Divine Comedy with Dante* features 103 figures from global history, many of whom are posed in ways that directly reprise (or remix, or mashup) other famous portraits (figure 1). Some of the figures are grouped around large tables, some are seated in chairs or on the floor, some leaning or standing, and a few appear on horseback. Many hold the tools of their respective trades: a paint palette, an electric guitar, a guandao, a carbine, a camera. They come from the realms of global politics, art, science, literature, sports, medicine, business, philosophy.

Mostly the figures look at one another—sometimes pointedly—but a handful also fix eyes on the viewer or gaze off into some imaginary distance.

Fig. 1. Dai Dudu, Li Tiezi, and Zhang Anjun. *Discussing the Divine Comedy with Dante.* Image captured from http://cliptank.com/PeopleofInfluencePainting.htm. Last accessed July 27, 2022.

The painting is enigmatic for a number of reasons: first, little is known about the artists themselves outside of their country of origin. In 2009—three years after the massive and complex painting was produced, when it resurfaced as a viral web sensation—the painters came to the attention of international audiences. They were identified as Dai Dudu, Li Tiezi, and Zhang Anjun, three contemporary oil painters with limited international exposure, led by Dai Dudu, an award-winning painter from Shenyang (Liaoning Province) who was then the vice president of the Liaoning Art Institute.[1] Inexplicably, some Western media outlets (including the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, and the *Daily Mail*) identified them as Taiwanese when they reported on the sensational painting, although the painters are consistently identified in Chinese media outlets as Chinese nationals from the Liaoning Province.[2] Only Dai

[1] For Dai Dudu's biography, see the "Artist Introduction" on *Artron*, https://dai-dudu.artron.net/about (last accessed February 12, 2022). See also the Chinese online encyclopedia *Baidu Baike*, which contains more-or-less complete entries for the painting (https://baike.baidu.com/item/与但丁讨论神曲/8907427) and two of the three artists: Dai Dudu (https://baike.baidu.com/item/戴都都) and Li Tiezi (https://baike.baidu.com/item/李铁子/8908373). Information about Zhang Anjun, the third collaborator, is inconsistent (links last accessed June 21, 2022). I extend my sincere thanks to Emily Lu, who assisted with the research on the artists and the painting, as well as any translations from the Chinese. Any errors or oversights that remain are my own.

[2] Reporting on a 2009 interview with creator Dai Dudu, the independent Chinese media outlet *Sina* identifies the artists as Chinese and details their associations with

appears to keep a public profile easily accessible outside of China, on the Chinese art database *Artron*, where one can view a gallery of his works in an online exhibition. Beyond scant entries in the Chinese digital encyclopedia *Baidu Baike*, I have not yet been able to locate detailed information about his two colleagues that would be accessible to a public that does not read Chinese.

What is also unclear is the location of this large-scale oil painting, which both *Artron* and *Baidu Baike* report to be 6 meters by 2.6 meters. Neither database lists the location of the original, recording it only as a collaborative project belonging to the series "戴都都作品在线展" [Dai Dudu Works Online Exhibition], even though it is clearly not a digital artifact. It does not appear to have been featured in the 2013 exhibition of Dai Dudu's oil paintings at the National Art Museum of China.[3] When Arielle Saiber—who wrote briefly of the painting in a discussion of Dante's role in American satire—attempted to locate the original, she discovered that there is a large-scale copy of it on a wall in a café-bar in

Liaoning Art Institute and the Shenyang Youth Association of Artists. Dai's biography on *Baidu Baike* and the Chinese art database *Artron* confirms his nationality as Chinese, indicating that he was born in February 1963 in Shenyang, in the province of Liaoning. And yet British journalists invariably refer to the painting and its creators as "Taiwanese" or "Chinese/Taiwanese." Writing for *The Guardian*, Jonathan Jones calls it a "Taiwanese oil painting." *The Daily Mail* follows suit, referring to the artists as "little-known-Taiwanese artists." Matthew Moore, writing for *The Telegraph*, splits the difference, referring to the artists as "Chinese/Taiwanese." In addition to the sources cited in the previous note, see "史上最神秘的油画大解密" ["The most mysterious oil painting in history"], *Sina Finance* (March 19, 2009), http://finance.sina.com.cn/money/collection/yhds/20090319/22536000262.shtml (accessed February 12, 2022); Paulina Hortono, "103 Famous Faces in One Painting," *China Digital Times* (March 20, 2009), https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2009/03/103-famous-faces-in-one-painting/ (accessed February 12, 2022). For the British sources, see Daily Mail Reporter, "The Internet sensation dinner-party painting with 103 historical guests—how many can you spot?" *Daily Mail* (March 18, 2009), https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1162771/The-Internet-sensation-dinner-party-painting-103-historical-guests--spot.html (accessed 12 February, 2022); Jonathan Jones, "It's the painting the web is abuzz about—but what does it mean," *The Guardian* (March 17, 2009), www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/mar/18/art-internet (accessed February 11, 2022); Matthew Moore, "103 famous faces in one painting," *The Telegraph* (March 16, 2009), https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/5001462/103-famous-faces-in-one-painting.html (accessed February 11, 2022). A high-resolution image of the painting, featuring hyperlinked labels to the 103 figures, is available at http://cliptank.com/ab/PeoplePainting2.htm (accessed February 11, 2022).

[3] See Wang Yiming, "戴都都油画展在中国美术馆开幕" [Dai Dudu Oil Painting Exhibition Opens at National Museum of China], *Artron* (March 18, 2013), https://daidudu.artron.net/news_detail_427254 (accessed February 12, 2022).

Plymouth, England, called The Caffeine Club.[4] Images of the painting—likely a decal affixed to a back wall of the dining area—appear on the Caffeine Club's Facebook page, and its dimensions (while still quite large) are significantly smaller than the painting's reported six-meter width. The social media site gives no further information about the image or how it was reproduced on the café wall, nor do the Chinese media sources I have as of yet been able to identify give any information about the original painting's location.

Furthermore, as I alluded to above, the painting itself generated a bit of viral Internet buzz a little over two years after it was completed, as netizens sought to identify the 103 figures represented therein.[5] In covering the crowdsourced attempts to identify and label all the one hundred historical figures in the painting, reporter Jonathan Jones of *The Guardian* points out that the painting is in the style of an 18th-century "conversation piece," describing the crowd as "an impossible gathering of historical figures in the afterlife."[6] There is no clear indication that this is the setting; rather, the places depicted in the painting are recognizable this-worldly monuments, like the Egyptian pyramids, the statues of Easter Island, Tiananmen, and Stonehenge. Nevertheless, Jones is right that the painting generated a conversation, as message boards lit up with discussions not only of who the figures are, but why they are paired with or looking at other figures, what objects lay nearby, and whose paintings their postures reprise.

It is not my objective here to discuss the particulars of the painting. Rather, I call attention to the image for the premise of the painting itself: the idea of discussing the *Divine Comedy* with Dante. In the upper right-hand corner of the image, behind a garden wall and thus quite literally walled off from and elevated above the mass of figures below, are four individuals: the three artists themselves (Dai Dudu, the young oil painter who apparently spearheaded the project, along with Li Tiezi and Zhang Anjun) together with the *sommo poeta*, who bears an open copy of his magnum

[4] Arielle Saiber, "Hell, yes! Dante in Contemporary American Satire," in *Dante satiro: Satire in Dante Alighieri's* Comedy *and Other Works*, edited by Fabian Alfie and Nicolino Applauso (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), ~~pp.~~ 171–86, especially p. 175.

[5] The entry on the painting in *Baidu Baike* suggests that it was Zhang Anjun who posted the image to the web for netizens to discover and enjoy, but I have not been able to corroborate this detail with other sources. See https://baike.baidu.com/item/与但丁讨论神曲/8907427 (last accessed June 21, 2022).

[6] Jones, "Painting," n.p.

opus in his right hand (figure 2). The four figures meditate silently on the spectacle of history that unfolds before them, and they offer neither explicit condemnation nor celebration of any one figure or another in the great mass of figures below them. Message board posters may have their theories about the painting's intentions, but pointed political or historical critique does not seem to be the artists' mission. Instead, the figures are mashed up in a transhistorical jumble, all of which is observed impassively by the artists from the garden above them. In their observations of this palimpsestic scramble of world historical figures, the artists find themselves, as the title suggests, "discussing the *Divine Comedy* with Dante," seemingly following in the poet's path as they observe global history unfolding before them, from a vantage point removed from the chaos of time and distance.

Fig. 2. Dai Dudu, Li Tiezi, and Zhang Anjun. *Discussing the Divine Comedy with Dante* (detail). Image captured from http://cliptank.com/PeopleofInfluencePainting.htm. Last accessed July 27, 2022.

The enigmatic painting, and especially its equally enigmatic title, taps into a phenomenon that Arielle Saiber and I have begun to document in our digital archive *Dante Today: Citings and Sightings of Dante's Works in Contemporary Culture* (https://dantetoday.krieger.jhu.edu).[7] Much like we see in the painting, artists, writers, and producers have for seven centuries—but with increasing frequency in the last century—sought ways to "discuss the *Divine Comedy* with Dante," entering into a dialogue with the poet as they use his works to describe, analyze, celebrate, and critique the contemporary world. In the pages that follow, I will first introduce the archive, particularly in terms of the theoretical orientation of our editorial team. I will discuss our reliance on the notion of the democratizing effects of textual "resonance," a theory first introduced by Wai Chee Dimock in 1997. Second, I

[7] At the time of writing (summer 2022), the *Dante Today* team has begun the process of migrating the site to the server of its new host institution, Johns Hopkins University. The screenshots included below are from the legacy site, hosted by Bowdoin College and online from 2006-2022 at https://research.bowdoin.edu/dante-today/.

will look at a specific aspect of the archive's design: our decision to rely on crowdsourcing for discovery and development of the archival holdings. This choice—which we see as central to the principle of democratizing Dante's text—has produced an unintended consequence: in the site's efforts to document the ways global artists and writers seek to "discuss the *Divine Comedy* with Dante," we see an overrepresentation of North American and Western European voices in the conversation we aim to record. Such an imbalance results, in part, from our decision to crowdsource our holdings, a mechanism which favors the participation of certain publics over others, replicating a center-periphery model that could undercut efforts at the accurate representation of the poem's broad transcultural heritage. I will conclude with a discussion of our plans to correct for this imbalance, through technical, promotional, and development initiatives, through which we intend to increase translingual and transcultural access, as well as to provide a platform to celebrate voices that have historically been relegated to the periphery of reception studies on Dante's work. Our initiatives will, we hope, allow us to turn up the volume on the voices of selected individuals who have sought provocative ways to enter into the conversation with Dante that is figured in the oil painting by Dai, Li, and Zhang.

Let Dead Poetry Rise Again: Dante Today and the Resonance of the 'Divine Comedy'

The *Dante Today* archive is a curated and crowdsourced digital repository that catalogs references to Dante and his works in twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultures (see homepage in figure 3). The site, newly hosted by Johns Hopkins University (as of fall 2022), was created in 2006 by Arielle Saiber with the help of David Israel at Bowdoin College. Saiber invited me to join as co-director of the site in 2012. To maintain both the collection and the site, Saiber and I collaborate with teams of IT staff, digital humanities specialists, and students from each of our home institutions.

We consider *Dante Today* a unique resource in the vast landscape of rich and excellent digital projects on Dante's *Comedy* in the way that it seeks to bridge scholarly and non-scholarly producers and their publics.[8] While many digital projects engaged with

[8] On the array of digital humanities projects dedicated to Dante's works, see the contributions in this essay cluster. See also the "state of the field" survey by Akash Kumar, "Digital Dante," in *The Oxford Handbook on Dante*, edited by Manuele Gragnolati,

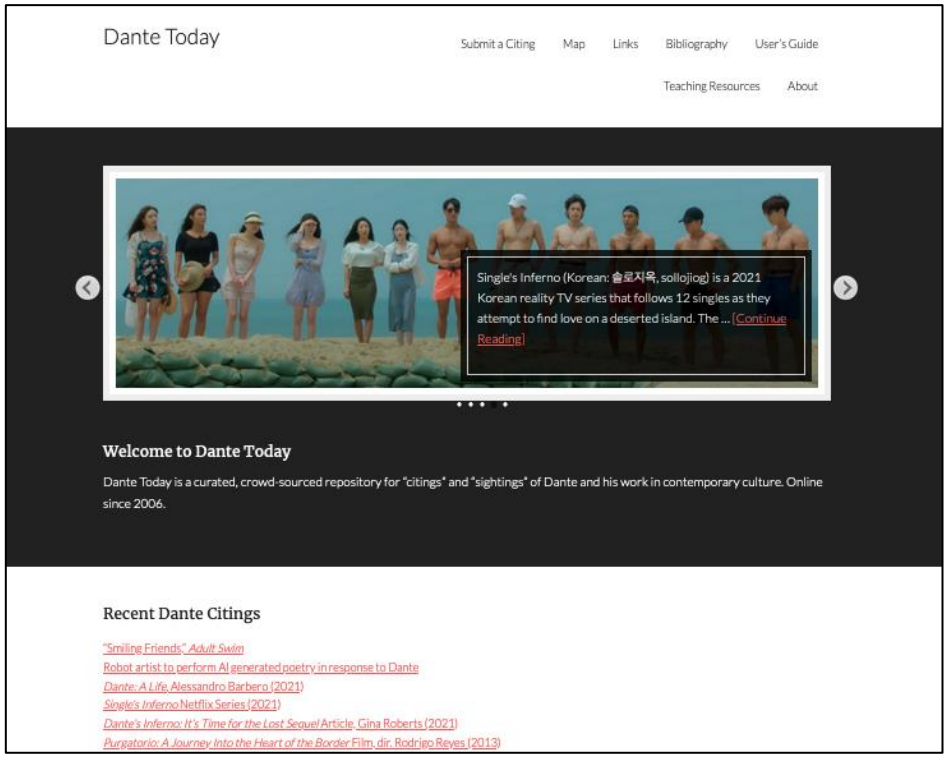

Fig. 3. *Dante Today* homepage. Image captured from https://research.bowdoin.edu/dante-today/. Last accessed July 27, 2022.

the heritage of the *Divine Comedy* preserve and promote the poem's canonicity, unlocking its mysteries for the lay reader, ours, by contrast, aims to shed light on the worlds that Dante initiated, and that have since his death 700 years ago continued to grow and transform into forms far outside of his intentions for them.[9] Rather than seeking to instruct our userbase, we seek to learn from them, gathering submissions of new materials through crowdsourcing and then cataloguing those submissions according to the taxonomies we have developed over the sixteen years of the archive's existence.

Our team's work serves two distinct ends: on the one hand, we preserve a set of cultural ephemera that, if not collected, would likely pass unnoticed or even disappear, and we provide a central

Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 96-108.

[9] While Kumar suggests that digital projects on Dante "do not, by their very definition, attempt to subvert the canon" ("Digital Dante," 97), ours works in the vein of what Manuele Gragnolati and his collaborators have called "decentering Dante," wherein we actively strive to elevate alternative voices into the conversation on the *Divine Comedy*, permitting those voices to resonate as they may. By doing so, we create a new or alternative canon of contemporary voices, and we loosen the poet's tight grip on the poem and its meaning, subverting his stringent intentions for reading and interpreting his verses.

access point for this eclectic and ever-changing body of references. On the other hand, we also listen in to a transglobal conversation among contemporary artists and writers who uncover in Dante's works a resonance through which they interpret their own worlds. Our digital archival project seeks to capture this resonance, documenting and promoting it in its myriad forms, for students, scholars, and aficionados of the poem and its afterlife to investigate.

We have selected the term "resonance" intentionally. Twenty-five years ago, in an essay for *PMLA*, Wai Chee Dimock advocated for what she called a "theory of resonance," which would interrogate the ways texts travel across times and spaces, mixing their original sounds with the ambient sounds of the cultures they encounter.[10] Dimock sees the interference of cultural "noise" as a democratizing function of literary reception, as texts are picked up by unknown readers and interpreted in unpredictable ways that don't merely rejuvenate the original text but also affirm the generative, life-giving, critical practice that is the very heart of the medium of literature itself. She writes, "I want to emphasize the extent to which the text, as a diachronic object, yields its words differently across time, authorizing contrary readings across the ages and encouraging a kind of semantic democracy. [. . .] Across time, its very words become unfixed, unmoored, and thus democratically claimable."[11] It is this "unfixed, unmoored, and… democratically claimable" *Divine Comedy* that we seek to document: we see ourselves as archivists who bear witness to the transcultural and transmedia conversation that has been generated by and mediated through this shared cultural touchstone.

Our archive makes visual the affirmative and generative exercise Dimock's article theorizes. One sees the source text revivified time and again—its "morta poesì" (*dead poetry*) brought back to life in ways that don't merely certify its canonical status or pay homage to its author, but instead strategically appropriate (and misappropriate) its characters, verses, topography, imagery, and so on, liberating them from the grip of their overbearing author and letting them engage with the world in new and unexpected ways.

[10] Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA*, vol. 112, no. 5 (1997): 1060-71. I have previously written on Dimock's "Theory of Resonance" in relation to the afterlife of Dante's *Commedia*, in my essay "*Dante Today*: Tracking the Global Resonance of the *Commedia*," in *Dante Beyond Borders: Contexts and Reception*, edited by Nick Havely and Jonathan Katz with Richard Cooper (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2021), 324-37. I thank Arielle Saiber for directing me to this essay in the first place.

[11] Dimock, "Resonance," 1067-68.

Dimock, again, would call this a desirable, democratizing outcome for cultural heritage, and it is this democratizing impulse that has guided our archival practices.

Crowdsourcing a "Democratically Claimable" Divine Comedy

The holdings of the *Dante Today* archive signal the consequences and the reach of the transmedial, transhistorical, and transnational resonance of Dante's works. Although the holdings currently number nearly 2,000 artifacts, the archive is not exhaustive. It is in continual evolution as new works are discovered and generated—a process which we have seen ramped up since early 2020 (when in the midst of the COVID-19 shutdowns Italy celebrated the first "Dantedì") and reinforced by the seventh centenary of Dante's death in 2021. In 2021 it proved especially challenging for our small team to keep up with the flood of possible submissions: talks, performances, readings, exhibitions, and other activities meant to commemorate the centenary, both in person and online, have inundated our hand-curated lists, and many have escaped our attention. We depend on our userbase to help us keep track. Specifically, in addition to our own personal and professional networks, we rely on crowdsourcing as one of the principal mechanisms of collection development. Users can submit their findings directly through the "submit a citing" tab, a crucial fixture of the site since Saiber created it in 2006, the same year the term "crowdsourcing" had been coined to describe business practices that arose in the wake of Web 2.0 technologies.[12]

Crowdsourcing as a digital humanities practice had its heyday in the early 2010s.[13] In those years, many universities and so-called GLAM institutions (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) embarked on mass transcription projects and data collection initiatives, employing the services of the "crowd" to participate in discovery, location, collection, description, assembly, and analysis efforts. Projects like *Old Weather* (https://www.oldweather.org/) and *Transcribe Bentham* (https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/transcribe-bentham/)—both initiated in 2010—have famously enlisted the

[12] Melissa Terras, "Crowdsourcing in the Digital Humanities," in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*, first ed., edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2016): 420-438 (p. 421).

[13] On the theory and history of crowdsourcing, see especially Daren C. Brabham, *Crowdsourcing*, MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Mia Ridge, ed., *Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage* (London: Ashgate, 2013); and Terras, "Crowdsourcing," 420-438.

public's help in historical transcription projects, engaging their audiences in the work of "citizen science."[14] Cultural heritage organizations have teamed up with universities to produce crowdsourced digital archives documenting contemporary events and histories through the collection of images, videos, narratives, oral histories, and other evidence from the contributing public. Prominent among these is the *Our Marathon* archive (https://marathon.library.northeastern.edu/), a community project hosted by Northeastern University, which collects and displays "pictures, videos, stories, and social media related to the Boston Marathon; the bombing on April 15, 2013; the subsequent search, capture, and trial of the individuals who planted the bombs; and the city's healing process."[15] Another critical digital archival project that relies on crowdsourcing for collection development is the *Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives* (*DALN*; www.thedaln.org), a publicly available repository of personal narratives about literacy practices and values. The *DALN*, which is co-sponsored by The Ohio State University (where the project was created in 2005) and Georgia State University, encourages wide public participation with its intentionally open infrastructure design, which features "an interface that posed as low a threshold to participate as possible."[16]

Crowdsourcing in various sectors has been linked to exploitative labor practices; I would highlight here Roopika Risam's incisive critique of anonymized crowdsourced coding labor in a marketplace like Amazon Mechanical Turk, which, in their "presumption of a universal subjectivity" erases the identities and cultural

[14] A smaller-scale recent transcription project is *La Sfera Challenge* (https://lasferachallenge.wordpress.com/; last accessed June 21, 2022), sponsored during the summer 2020 shutdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In two two-week sessions, teams of participants (primarily but not exclusively scholars) collaborated and competed in a race to transcribe portions of Goro Dati's fifteenth-century geographic treatise, *La Sfera*. In addition to consulting the webpages of these individual projects, see the eight essays in the "Case Studies" section of Ridge, ed., *Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage*, 17-208.

[15] See "Our Stories, Our Strength, Our Marathon," https://marathon.library.northeastern.edu/ (last accessed June 21, 2022). See also the discussion in Terras, "Crowdsourcing," 434.

[16] H. Lewis Ulman, "A Brief Introduction to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN)," in *Stories that Speak to Us: Exhibits from the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives*, edited by H. Lewis Ulman, Scott Lloyd DeWitt, and Cynthia L. Selfe (Logan, UT: Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State University Press, 2013), https://ccdigitalpress.org/book/stories/chapters/introduction/ (last accessed June 21, 2022).

backgrounds of its coders.[17] But within the cultural heritage sector, crowdsourcing has been seen to open up critical avenues for inclusion, valuing the labor and contributions of large-scale, diverse publics that have historically been excluded from research. Advocates of crowdsourcing methods in the cultural heritage sector insist that the labor of the crowd represents much more than a means to lower costs or to make content more accessible. In her study of crowdsourcing in digital humanities projects, Melissa Terras concludes, "crowdsourcing in the humanities is about engagement, and encouraging a wide, and different, audience to engage in processes of humanistic inquiry, rather than merely being a cheap way to encourage people to get a necessary job done."[18] When done correctly, that is, crowdsourcing offers a range of diverse audiences both inside and outside academia opportunities for meaningful participation in scholarly work without taking advantage of their labor.

It is Terras's "wide, and different, audience" that we mean to engage as well. We receive direct submissions from artists and writers, curators and performers, teachers and students, scholars and "laypeople" from around the world, all of whom engage with the poem according to motivations, arguments, and viewpoints idiosyncratic to their reading of it. In our attempt to document the furthest reaches of the worlds—both fictional and not—that Dante's poem touches, *Dante Today* thus shares some features with what have been called "participatory heritage" projects.[19] In their volume of the same name, Henriette Roued-Cunliffe and Andrea Copeland describe participatory heritage projects as collaborative endeavors that "tend to place more importance on content and less importance on medium, process or professional expertise; thus they acknowledge a diversity of expertise and operate from a premise of

[17] See Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 130-131.

[18] Terras, "Crowdsourcing," 430. In her remarks Terras echoes Trevor Owens, the first Head of Digital Content Management at the Library of Congress, who authored an influential series of blogposts on the role of crowdsourcing in cultural heritage. Owens writes, "At its best, crowdsourcing is not about getting someone to do work for you, it is about offering your users the opportunity to participate in public memory." See Owens, "Crowdsourcing Cultural Heritage: The Objectives are Upside Down," March 10, 2012, http://www.trevorowens.org/2012/03/crowdsourcing-cultural-heritage-the-objectives-are-upside-down/ (last accessed June 21, 2022).

[19] See Henriette Roued-Cunliffe and Andrea Copeland, eds., *Participatory Heritage* (London: Facet Publishing, 2017).

shared authority."[20] Similarly, our archive organizes its collection not around the principles of professional expertise, sanctioned authority, or deep engagement with the content the contributions ostensibly describe. Rather, we look to the expansive reach of that content, sometimes far from its original contexts and concerns. The set-up intentionally moves responsibility for collection development out of the hands of experts and into the realm of the "crowd."

The contributory mechanisms we have implemented, however, do not mean that our archive presents what Isto Huvila calls a "radical user orientation," opening up the kind of collaboration between archivist and user afforded by the participatory possibilities inherent to Web 2.0 technology, and often advocated by public historians, digital humanities scholars, and GLAM institutions.[21] We have explicitly chosen not to "crowd out the archivist"—to borrow Alexandra Eveleigh's cautionary term—by shifting full curatorial control over to the community of users that engage with the materials on our site.[22] We do not, for example, have an automated posting system: all submission forms are first processed in emails sent directly to Saiber and me, and we do our utmost to reply to each contributor with a personal message and in a timely fashion. Although it would certainly be more expedient to remove this additional step, we do not wish to integrate such an auto-posting mechanism into the submission form, thus delivering full, free authorship capabilities over to the "crowd." The development of the ever-growing collection of "citings" and "sightings" in *Dante Today* depends on the contributions of our community of users, but the members of our research team act in that community both as participants and as gatekeepers, maintaining control over what

[20] Roued-Cunliffe and Copeland, "Introduction: What is participatory heritage?," in *Participatory Heritage*, xv. See also the discussion of the "Archival Commons" model in Alexandra Eveleigh, "Crowding Out the Archivist? Locating Crowdsourcing within the Broader Landscape of Participatory Archives," in *Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage*, 211-229, especially 218-220.

[21] See, among others, Isto Huvila, "Participatory Archive: Towards Decentralised Curation, Radical User Orientation, and Broader Contextualisation of Records Management," *Archival Science* 8, no. 1 (2008): 15-36; Elizabeth Yakel, "Who Represents the Past? Archives, Records, and the Social Web," in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions (Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels)*, ed. Terry Cook (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), 257-278; Owens, "Crowdsourcing Cultural Heritage," n.p.; as well as many of the authors in the born-digital, open-access, and publicly reviewed volume *Writing History in the Digital Age*, eds. Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki, *Digitalculturebooks* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

[22] Eveleigh, "Crowding Out the Archivist?," 211.

passes muster as an authentic reference to Dante and his poem, as opposed to, for example, a generic reference to the devil or to the heat of hell, of which we receive many.

Whose Dante? The Voice of the "Crowd" in Translingual and Transcultural Representation

Our role as gatekeepers in archival collection and development has proven central not only for verifying user submissions, but also for rebalancing archival holdings in response to what could become structural exclusions in the collection. We have discovered that there are unintended consequences to our decision to crowdsource the archival holdings, which can be seen most apparently in the map of sightings (https://dantetoday.krieger.jhu.edu/map; figure 4). Here is the issue: on the map we see an apparent overrepresentation of North American and Western European "sightings" and the underrepresentation of regions which have also proven to be fertile areas of growth for creative responses to the poem, in terms

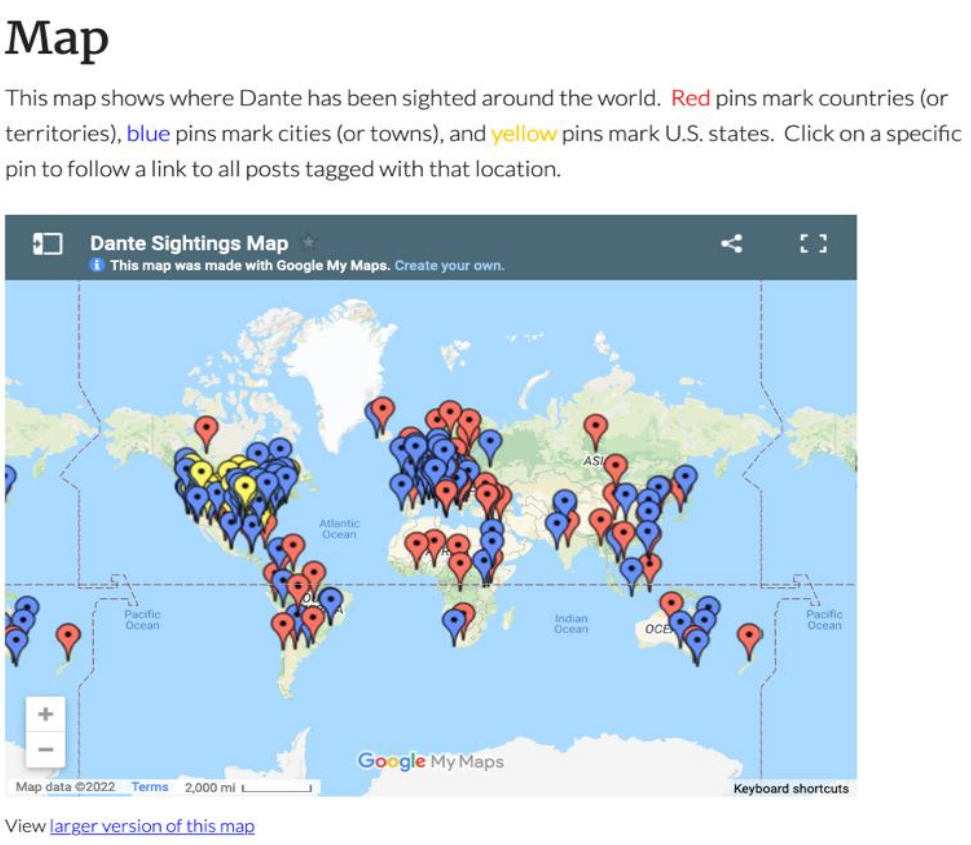

Fig. 4. *Dante Today Map*. Image captured from https://research.bowdoin.edu/dante-today/map/. Last accessed July 27, 2022.

of both the quality or depth of these responses, and the quantity of responses that certain regions generate. Structural features of the archive make it difficult to test our hypothesis of Dante's expansive reach outside of the Global North: because *Dante Today* relies on crowdsourcing and is curated by two American scholars who speak Romance languages, the collection skews toward European and North American content. Although we actively solicit submissions and seek posts from regions currently underrepresented in the archive, the overrepresentation of the Global North in the archive's holdings continues to be a persistent feature of our map.[23]

Ironically, one of the principal obstacles to our attempts at the most accurate and inclusive picture of the *Comedy*'s transcultural resonance is the "crowd" itself. Our "democratizing" decision to utilize crowdsourcing as the primary mechanism of data creation and collection development has also allowed for persistent dominance of voices from the Global North, especially from Italy and North America. The reasons for this dominance are both historical—resulting from canon formation, national cultural heritage, and the legacies of colonialism—and idiosyncratic to our archive (these regions happen to be central to our personal and professional networks). As we create targeted opportunities to better represent Dante's resonance in the Global South, the "crowd" from the Global North—a crowd that itself represents a diverse admixture of identities, particularly as regards institutional affiliation or other forms of cultural capital—continues to send submissions, which we would have to selectively ignore if we wished to correct the balance of cultural or linguistic representation. The democratizing outcome desired by Dimock's theory of resonance, which is aided by the group of "citizen scholars" who contribute to our archive, is also undone by that same mechanism of engagement with the "crowd," whose contributions—which we enthusiastically welcome—make North American and Western European voices resonate just that much more loudly in the archival holdings.

In other words, as we actively seek to democratize collection development by enabling the participation of the "crowd," we also perpetuate an imbalance that would—falsely, I believe—suggest a

[23] The issue of contributor bias is also well documented in the case of Wikipedia, where marginalized groups are underrepresented both in terms of the historical content housed in the crowdsourced encyclopedia and in terms of the ethnic, racial, and gender identities of its contributors. See Henriette Roued-Cunliffe, "Forgotten history on Wikipedia," in Roued-Cunliffe and Copeland, eds., *Participatory Heritage*, 67-76. See also the discussion in Laura Ingallinella's contribution to this issue.

clear divide between the greater or broader engagement of audiences in the Global North, and the less extensive cultural production of audiences in the Global South. And yet we know that this is not an accurate representation of the poem's rich translingual and transcultural resonance. I will give two brief examples of recent projects that illustrate the depth and scale of engagement that Dante's poem enjoys in the Global South, which would be obscured by the quantity of sightings from Western Europe and North America: first, the work of the group DanteSSA, the Dante Society of South Africa (https://dantesocietysoutha.wixsite.com/my-site), a grassroots organization founded in 2019 by students and scholars at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Together, the students produced a collection of poems, essays, fiction, artworks, and other creative works—featured on their website and in a volume, *A South African Convivio with Dante: Born Frees' Interpretations of the* Commedia (Firenze University Press, 2021)—that articulate their sense of the poem's immediacy, their engagement with the poet as if he were a peer with whom they share an intimate dialogue, and a mentor with whom they can both confide and compete.[24] Although not itself representative of a vast quantity of responses to Dante's works like what we see in regions like North America, the volume's grassroots production—led by undergraduate students and two dedicated teachers—points to a vein of underground creative response to the poem that remains difficult to document without chance encounters and targeted publicity efforts.

A second example of extensive engagement outside the "center" of our map is the collective Twitter reading #Dante2018, which ricocheted across five continents in the first part of that year and brought to light the deeply held and electric attraction to Dante's poem across contemporary Latin America. At the end of November 2017, Pablo Maurette—an Argentinian essayist who was at the time teaching literature at a small college in the American Midwest—tweeted his intention to reread Dante's *Divine Comedy*, one canto per day, for the first hundred days of 2018 (figure 5). The call went viral. Using the hashtag #Dante2018, some five thousand readers collectively tweeted their reading experience of the poem as they progressed through it day by day. Meanwhile,

[24] See Sonia Fanucchi and Anita Virga, eds., *A South African Convivio with Dante: Born Frees' Interpretations of the* Commedia (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2021). I am exceedingly grateful to Anita Virga for having shared a copy of this rich volume with me.

Fig. 5. Pablo Maurette [@maurette79]. Twitter post. January 1, 2018, 11:27am. https://twitter.com/maurette79/status/947866901700224. Last accessed February 4, 2022.

artists, illustrators, writers, designers, and performers generated creative responses to their reading, which they circulated on social media. Unlike the DanteSSA volume, which represents high-quality but smaller-scale engagement with Dante's works, #Dante2018 demonstrated both: the contributions of professional artists and illustrators were balanced by comments, quotations, jokes, sketches, GIFs, and photographs from thousands of Twitter users, whose engagement with the poem demonstrates that it resonates across the continent both deeply and broadly, along the lines of what we see in North American popular culture. The collective Twitter reading thus opened a window onto the great variety of ways that diverse audiences of readers across Latin America engage with the poem, but to which we have thus far had limited exposure, given the personal and professional limits of our own networks.

With these two examples I don't mean to insinuate that there is some previously undiscovered cache of Dante-inspired artifacts hiding in plain sight across the seemingly underexplored regions of our map. Nor do I wish to assert that our archive's map of "sightings" inaccurately represents the reach of Dante's transglobal resonance, especially across the Global South. Instead, my point here is that the structure of the archive—which is intentionally dependent

on the crowd as a means of democratizing its holdings—could also impose unintentional barriers that would prevent us from assessing with any certainty the extent of Dante's transcultural heritage outside its traditional centers. In other words, the exuberant interventions of the crowd at the center of that heritage prevent us from listening equally attentively to what happens at its margins.

From "Crowd" to "Crowds"

The representational reach of the crowdsourcing aspects of our project is limited by several critical factors, which we hope to begin to address in revisions of the site and of its promotional platforms: first, the site currently exists only in English, with the exception of select posts, the descriptions of which are in Italian or, more recently, Spanish and French.[25] Although the archive documents a great number and variety of items from East Asia, for example, we are forced by our own linguistic limitations to cite English- or Romance-language accounts of those items, like the media coverage of the Chinese oil painting *Discussing the Divine Comedy with Dante* with which I began this essay. This, we hope, involves a straightforward technical solution: we hope to correct for the site's linguistic limitations by installing a translation plug-in that would auto-translate the archive's pages and posts into a host of other languages, allowing us to enable access to the site in non-Anglophone regions, and to encourage the participation (through the auto-translated submission form) of contributors who speak neither English nor a Romance language.

The second and more complicated limitation of crowdsourcing the development of the archive's holdings themselves—in particular with an eye to more inclusive representation of what we see as a transglobal phenomenon—is the nature of the site's reach. Even now, sixteen years after its launch, the site has never been formally advertised, and we have only just begun to cultivate a social media presence (a publicity initiative that we long resisted out of concerns over the management of multiple social media channels, but which we now recognize as necessary). We have relied on our personal and professional networks to raise notice of the archive and to solicit contributions. This has, thus far, served us well in terms of project management and the supervision of our research staff, who have not struggled to keep up with the steady trickle of posts

[25] This welcome criticism was also pointed out by Matteo Maselli in his contribution to this essay cluster.

coming in through casual submission. But, as I indicated above, this has also led to a possible structural imbalance favoring European and North American sightings, even though we know that rich engagement with the poem extends far beyond these regions, as DanteSSA's *Convivio* and #Dante2018 examples demonstrate.

In spite of the promotional efforts we may make through our social media accounts, I don't expect that this imbalance will be easily corrected. As we promote the archive through social media channels, we reach wider audiences and increase our userbase. But we do not diversify that audience in terms of transcultural or multilingual representation; we merely turn up the volume on Dante's resonance across the globe, in both the Global North and the Global South. I don't believe, in other words, that if we build it, users from a more diverse range of "crowds" across the globe will simply come: we can only develop outreach strategies that target individuals (like Anita Virga, who presented on the South African "Convivio" at a conference I attended in May 2022, or Pablo Maurette, author of the #Dante2018 movement and now my colleague at Florida State University) who have connections to communities that are currently underrepresented and hope, through these connections, to capture the attention of users outside of the two dominant regions on our map.[26]

I take very seriously the "call to action" issued by Roopika Risam in the conclusion to her groundbreaking 2019 book *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy*.[27] Risam writes:

> This is the promise of the digital humanities: critical, generous, digital scholarship that has the potential to cross institutional sectors; overcome the divides between archive, library, university, and museum; and create networked publics. What if we were to use these affordances of digital humanities in the service of communities that have been marginalized in digital knowledge production? This vision has not been fully realized yet. Currently, the digital cultural record is circumscribed by inequality around identitarian categories that are magnified at the intersections of these categories. Inequalities are reinscribed, amplified, and circulated. But the participatory nature of the internet gives us the opportunities to look beyond ourselves and our institutions, to partner with our local communities, to engage the shift in media consumption from consumer to producer for positive change, to create spaces in

[26] See the critical discussion of "Archival Commons" optimism in Eveleigh, "Crowding Out the Archivist," 219-220.

[27] See also her chapter 3, "Remaking the Global Worlds of Digital Humanities," 65-87.

> which we can make legible the stories that go untold and the voices that go unheard.[28]

Risam tasks practitioners across the fields of digital humanities research to utilize the potential of DH methods—which in their very nature afford radical opportunities for participation across geographical and institutional divides—to both represent the stories of and create avenues of access for communities that have been historically relegated to the margins of digital epistemologies. While digital humanists strive for greater public participation and engagement, Risam stresses, they must also take into account the publics (or "crowds") who are welcomed into (and/or excluded from) the conversations they initiate.

Risam's clarion call to digital humanists of all stripes is one that the *Dante Today* research team aims to heed in its next phase: the development of a multimedia virtual gallery (using the Scalar platform and hosted by FSU Libraries' CreateFSU initiative). With the help of guest curators, the virtual gallery will feature exhibits which will highlight the contributions of voices that have long been marginalized within or excluded from the field of Dante studies. The first curators, whom we hope to contact via targeted networking efforts and active collaborations, will be artists and experts from local communities whose stories we seek to make legible to our users. The exhibits these curators design will, as Risam advocates, create spaces in which we—or, better, our community partners—can make untold stories manifest to a wider audience of interested students, scholars, aficionados, and critics of Dante's works. Some of the earliest of the exhibits will be area-studies-focused, tracing the compelling and complicated history of Dante's resonance in the Caribbean, Latin America, East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, especially in the former Italian colonies of East Africa. We seek to identify potential guest curators from both inside and outside academia, with the hope that we will partner with experts in these subfields to develop exhibits that might not only highlight the unique contributions of these regions but also assist with the possible structural imbalances in our collection development that I have highlighted here. Through these partnerships, we aim to cultivate relationships with scholars, writers, and creators outside of our current networks, building sustainable collaborations

[28] Risam, *New Digital Worlds*, 142-143.

that will continue to drive more equitable representation within the collection.

The creation of a virtual gallery space to platform the voices of creators from underrepresented communities will not address the deeper structural imbalances within archival holdings, which are a by-product of our decision to crowdsource collection development. We will not reverse our decision to crowdsource: we remain committed to the representation of the "unfixed, unmoored, and… democratically claimable" *Divine Comedy* that Dimock's theory of resonance celebrated 25 years ago, recording the resonances of the poem wherever they may arise. But we also plan to move forward with a clear idea of the audiences (both participants and users), scope, and limitations of our site and the global, translingual, and transcultural heritage that it represents. Whatever the future of Dante studies' approach to the realms of digital humanities and global reception studies, we hope that *Dante Today* will remain a space that embraces anachronism, creative engagement strategies, and diverse publics. After all, it is here, in this embrace, that dead poetry may rise again.[29]

[29] This essay owes a great debt to the team that have built and maintain the *Dante Today* archive, especially my co-PI on that project, Arielle Saiber. I would also like to acknowledge our long-time IT master, David Israel of Bowdoin College, the new team at Johns Hopkins University, and the staff of undergraduate students who have helped us to write, categorize, tag, and map the nearly 2,000 posts in the archive. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Florida State undergraduate students Sephora Affa, Harrison Betz, and Hannah Raisner for their work on the project in the 2021-22 academic year.