

Adapting Dante's Francesca: Re-imagining a Medieval Epic in Modern Latin America



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Introduction

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* seems to be everywhere. The 14th-century poetic epic is studied in global classrooms, appears on "Great Books" lists, and has been translated (partially or completely) into 72 languages.¹ The words of Italy's "Great Poet" also show up in referential form. They are quoted in political speeches; visualized in sculpture, murals, paintings, and cartoons; cited in film and television; adapted into video games; alluded to in countless poems, novels, plays, and short stories; tweeted and posted; shared and liked. Of course, the distribution of these references is not uniform. Allusions to Dante are much more common in European and North American settings; however, they still occur in spaces without extensive histories of Italian cultural influence, like Latin America (see map below). Dantean references can also vary in the involvement of their author in the creative process; quoting Dante takes very little effort, adapting him demands much more. This project focuses on select Latin American adaptations of one of Dante's characters (Francesca da Rimini from *Inferno 5*). In analyzing these texts – and images – it seeks to investigate the broader themes which underscore Latin American interpretations of Dante's *Inferno* as it has been re-imagined in temporal and cultural contexts distinct from those of its homeland.



Where in the World is Dante Alighieri? –

Map of Dantean "sightings" and "citations" reported to the digital archive *Dante Today*. Red pins designate countries, blue pins cities, and yellow pins U.S. states.

Background

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*:

- An Italian poem written in the early 14th-century. Recounts a journey through the Christian afterlife in three parts (*Inferno*, Hell; *Purgatorio*, Purgatory; and *Paradiso*, Heaven).

Francesca da Rimini:

- Character in the *Inferno* based on a historical figure. Punished along with her adulterous lover, Paolo Malatesta, in the circle of the lustful.
- Extensively referenced within European (Romantic) art and literature.

Unpacking "Latin America":

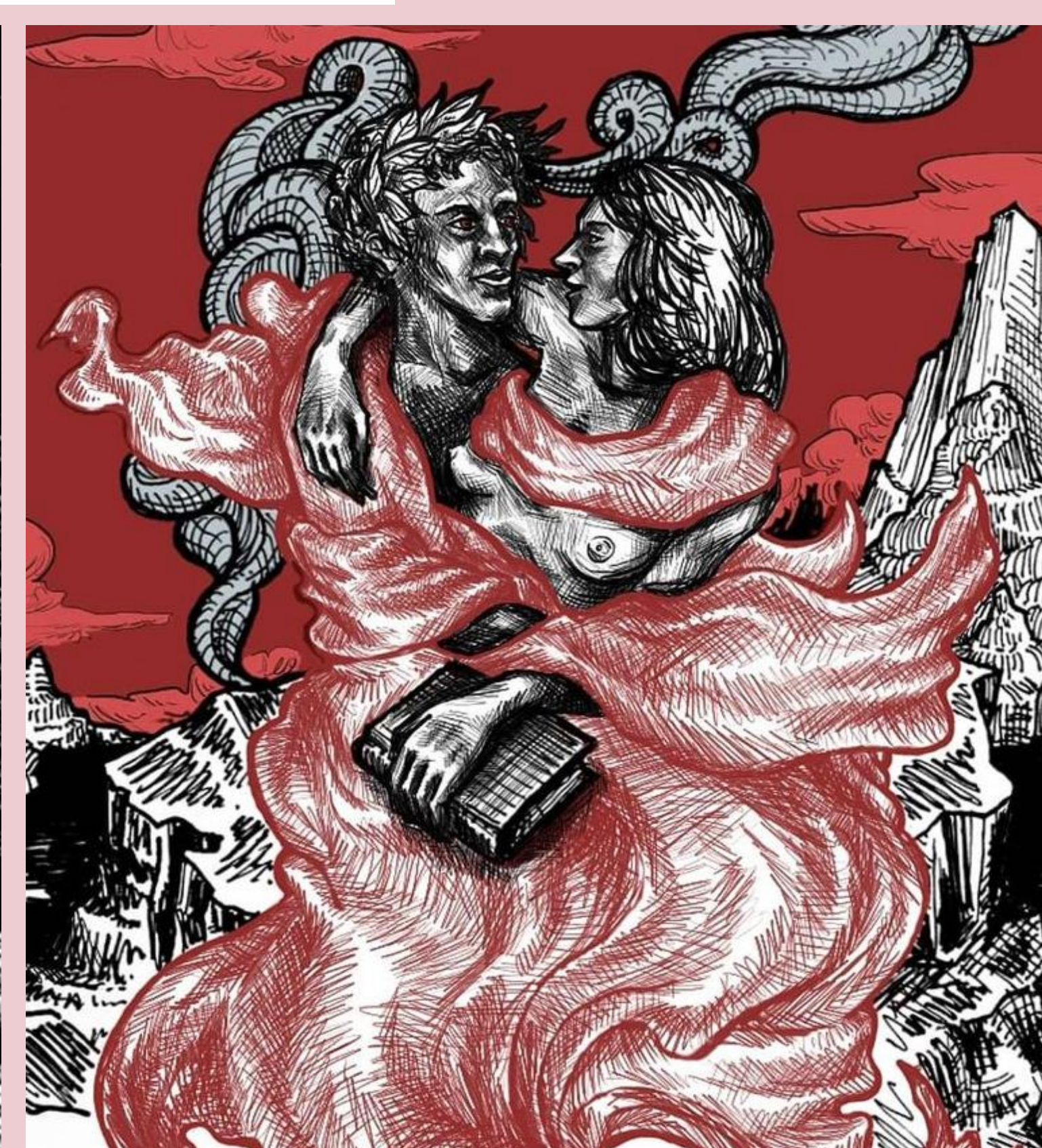
- "Latin America is an identity and ... like all identities, its meaning is constructed by the people who try to define it."²
- National breakdown of this investigation's selected adaptations: Argentina – 5, Chile – 2, Cuba – 1
- Nationality and linguistic "commonalities" can be slippery considering creator biographies: "Cuban" Carpentier was Swiss-born and wrote frequently in French, "Chilean" Bolaño lived mostly abroad.



Francesca and Paolo in Argentine Art–

- Francesca, Paolo y Minos el rey poderoso*, Esteban Serrano (left)
- Canto V del Inferno*, Leonardo Achilli (bottom right)
- Inferno V*, Maru Ceballos (bottom left)

Left: "les tuve pena y casi me desmayo" [I felt sorry for them and I almost fainted] (my translation)



¡OH FRANCESCA, LA BELLEZA ABSOLUTA, HACIA DÓNDE TE LLEVARÁN MIS ALAS! – NERUDA
LA QUE CONTIENE TODA LA GRANDEZA Y LA MISERIA DEL MUNDO Y QUE SÓLO ES VISIBLE PARA QUIENES AMAN - BOLAÑO
AQUEL DÍA ... 'NO LEÍMOS MÁS ALLA' - CARPENTIER
SON PAOLO Y AMOR, CH'A NULO AMATO FRANCESCA Y TAMBIÉN A MAR PERDONA LA REINA Y SU AMANTE PUES EN MI PROGRAMA Y TODOS LOS AMANTES DE JOVEN VIAJERO, QUE HAN SIDO DESDE EN T R A B A , AQUEL ADÁN Y SU EVA NATURALMENTE, UNA EN EL PASTO DEL VISITA A LA PATRIA DE PARAÍSO - BORGES FRANCESCA - LUGONES

Discussion

Desiring Francesca – Pablo Neruda's "Ivresse" and Roberto Bolaño's "La francesa" adapt Dante's Francesca with a particular focus on desire. Both consider the implications of lust and the positioning of Francesca as desiring-subject/desired-object; however, the method of these mediations point to divergent relationships with dominant (European) literary traditions.

Picturing Francesca – In their illustrations *Inferno 5* (see left), Esteban Serrano, Leonardo Achilli, and Maru Ceballos participate in established interpretative traditions surrounding the Francesca episode. Serrano reduces Francesca to a cartoonish neutrality, Achilli renders Francesca in her typically seductive mode, and Ceballos returns to Francesca a sense of feminine agency. These images also shed light on the century-spanning project of visualizing the *Comedy* as an interplay between the demands of consumption and the ideals of representation.

Reading Francesca – Three separate adaptations – Jorge Luis Borges' poem "Inferno, V, 129," Alejo Carpentier's short story "El derecho de asilo," and Leopoldo Lugones' short story "Francesca" – approach the Francesca episode from the lens of reading. This quotidian action becomes a site for expansion and provides insight into the manifest roles of intertextual references within these texts.

"Lo elige solamente quien busca..."

As an addition to the analytical work presented here, I carried out an email-based survey of Latin American artists and academics that work with Dante. That investigation involved 7 participants from Peru, Argentina, and Mexico. Some common themes from their responses:

- Dante is frequently cited, but less frequently read
- New interest in his works (especially in academic and artistic circles) has led to "nuclei" of study in places like Buenos Aires and Lima
- The cultural relevance of the *Comedy* at a region level is debatable; however, his works still appear to exert canonical influence
- The *Comedy* creates community in shared/collective readings like the *Lectura Dantis Limensis* and like #Dante2018

References and Image Credits

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