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Flamenco in NYC - Prof. Adams
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Postmodern Flamenco - New York City (Summer 2014)

In New York City a fan of flamenco music and dance can go out any day of the week to enjoy a show or participate in some activity related to "flamenco;" the scene in New York is vibrant and varied. The website FlamencoBuzz.com, edited by Mari Castigianis, posts flamenco events, classes, and concerts that take place in different venues across the city, including shows by flamenco guitarists, dance classes, and ensemble performances, not to mention the world renowned Flamenco Festival in New York City which takes place every March. During the spring and summer of 2014 I attended over a dozen different flamenco events, and I noticed that besides being an art form with roots that reach back for centuries in southern Spain, "flamenco" is also a useful label for promotion. I saw advertising for a wide variety of shows that used the term "flamenco" to describe disparate art forms in New York which are somehow related to the traditional music which comes from Andalusia, Spain. The multifarious nature of the New York flamenco scene supports the thesis set forward in Gerhard Steingress' work, *Flamenco Postmoderno* (2007), in which he rejects purist opinions of some theorists who say that "true flamenco" is a Gypsy art. Instead, Steingress defends the idea that from its inception the genre of flamenco music has always assimilated traits from a variety of traditions, and it continues to do so today on a global scale (Steingress, 2007). In the following pages I will examine several perspectives on flamenco music to inform my interpretation of the New York flamenco scene from my fieldwork there from April to August of 2014. The flamenco scene in New York

supports Steingress' opinion that cultural hybridization is a defining characteristic of flamenco music, both in postmodern flamenco today, and since its inception.

Traditional flamenco arts are often divided into three classes: *cante*, *toque*, and *baile* (singing, guitar playing, and dancing); the tense, throaty, melismatic singing is often accompanied by clapping of hands (*palmas*), and sophisticated guitar strumming and finger-picking (Molina, 1985). Another important part of traditional Flamenco music is the use of strict rhythmic patterns that define a piece. There are dozens of different rhythms (*palos*) that are used to classify songs, including *seguiriyas*, *fandangos*, *bulerias*, *alegrias*, *tangos*, etc. (Rossy, 1966). Specific melodic and harmonic structures are also important defining features of flamenco music, which include chord progressions and cadences like the "Andalusian cadence," which consists of four chords that descend by step (VI - V - IV - III) (Rossy, 1966). Traditional flamenco is usually considered to be emotional (sometimes volatile) and virtuosic, and full of dynamic, rhythmic, and harmonic changes. One landmark compilation of flamenco music is a CD collection called *Duende* (Charno, 1994), which presents different of styles of flamenco, and reflects the wide variety of flamenco music from "traditional" to present day "flamenco-fusion." One aspect that most of the songs on this compilation have in common is that the music tells stories of love lost, suffering, angst, anger, and sorrow, which are all common themes that reach back to the roots of flamenco music (Mitchell, 1994). What are the roots of flamenco? This question is hotly debated amongst flamencologists, and one of the central issues of the debate focuses on the role of Gypsies (*gitano*) and non-Gypsies (*payo*) in the history and development of flamenco.

The complex, multifaceted world of flamenco scholarship has inspired many books and articles devoted to a range of topics related to the *gitano / payo* question, taking into account aesthetics, history, ethnology, geography, performance practices, and other aspects of flamenco music. The debate centers on the differences between Gypsies (*gitanos*) and non-Gypsies (*payos*) in Spain, and their contributions to the origins and the development of flamenco music. Amongst flamencologists, several trends have emerged regarding the contributions of both *gitanos* and *payos* to the flamenco arts, and they have developed different perspectives regarding the concept of "authenticity" and cultural ownership. The flamencologist Maria Papapavlou illustrates the importance of cultural identity and the *gitano / payo* debate in flamenco music in her fieldwork in the small Andalucian city, Jerez de la Frontera near Cadiz. In this city, flamenco music serves as the defining factor which differentiates between Gypsy and non-Gypsy communities who have lived together in certain neighborhoods for generations. These communities have co-existed and intermarried for so many years that there are no longer any physical or linguistic features that make it possible for one group to recognize the other as, "the other." The defining factor that differentiates these communities is how each one approaches flamenco music within a variety of contexts, both private and public. Both communities lay claim to flamenco as "their" music, and they describe how "the others" practice some adulterated version (Papapavlou, 2003a).

The flamencologist William Washabaugh addresses the evolution of several contrasting academic perspectives on the *gitano / payo* question in chapter two of his book *Flamenco* (1996); the chapter is called "The Histories of Flamenco." One of the earlier "histories of flamenco" which Washabaugh mentions emphasizes the Andalusian character of flamenco music on one hand, and at the same time diminishes the specific role of the Gypsies and their

contributions to this genre. The idea that flamenco is specifically music of Andalucia is most clearly expressed in Anselmo Gonzalez Climent's work from 1953, *Flamencologia.* In contrast to the regional, geographic focus of Climent's perspective, Washabaugh cites Antonio Mairena (1966), who argued that true flamenco music is rooted in Gypsy culture. In his book *Mundo y Formas del Cante Flamenco* (co-authored with Manuel Molina) Mairena directs the reader's attention to the ethnic roots of flamenco, connected to the *gitano* people, not the people of Andalusia in general, as Climent suggested. In the next section of his chapter titled "Histories of Flamenco," Washabaugh summarizes a rebuttal to Mairena's gitanocentric perspective on flamenco music by scholars like Whitney (1974), Woodall (1992), and Herrero (1991), who present the "populist" perspective, which says that flamenco music is the cry of oppressed people who came from a variety of different backgrounds, not necessarily Andalusian, nor Gypsy. These authors argue that marginalized people like migrant workers, miners, vagrants, robbers, or anyone who comes from what was considered to be the dregs of society are the true representatives of the roots of flamenco. (Washabaugh, 1996)

A more recent perspective that Washabaugh describes, states that there are a variety of influences inherent in the roots of flamenco; this theory focuses on "the sociological history of flamenco," which is postulated by scholars like Steingress (1993), Garcia Gomez (1993), and Timothy Mitchell (1994). These scholars counter the arguments that describe the Gypsy and populist roots of flamenco by claiming that in the mid 1800s flamenco music developed from a "mutually cathartic dialogue" between the lower and upper classes. Steingress and others who argue in favor of this sociohistorical perspective, say that through performances of flamenco music, both the dominant culture and the oppressed performers, who came from the lower

classes, achieved a “sense of catharsis” during performances, and this musical and “cathartic” dialogue is the central feature that indicates how flamenco emerged in southern Spain in the mid 1800s. Washabaugh’s own perspective focuses on the “ironies” that are present in the varied “histories of flamenco.” He recognizes that each of these histories offers helpful perspectives to understand the complex development of flamenco music, but he also reveals specific faults in the arguments offered by the different flamencologists who, in Washabaugh’s opinion, are too narrow in their perspective and interpretation of the evidence regarding the roots of flamenco. (Washabaugh, 1996)

In his book, *Flamenco Postmoderno* (2007), Gerhard Steingress, a professor of flamencology at the University of Seville, offers a more recent theory on the development of flamenco from its inception in the mid 1800’s, to the present state of flamenco in the 21st century. Steingress describes several central characteristics which reveal that flamenco is a postmodern art form influenced by both *gitano* and *payo* traditions. Steingress describes flamenco music today as the result of cultural hybridization, and he states that flamenco as a recognizable art form emerged in the 19th century from the mixing of multiple musical traditions that had already coexisted in southern Spain for generations. He vehemently opposes the suggestion that “true” flamenco comes exclusively from the Gypsies. Steingress argues that *payos* and *gitanos* have both contributed to the development of the flamenco arts, and he says that it is impossible to prove that one culture is responsible for the “pure roots” of flamenco music. He even suggests that the *gitano* character of flamenco has been intentionally exaggerated by promoters as an effective tool to sell flamenco music by appealing to audiences’ interest in encountering stereotypical expressions of the exotic. (Steingress, 2007)

On page 120 of *Flamenco Postmoderno* Steingress describes flamenco music's transition from modern to postmodern (approx. 1850 - 1980), by following Walter Buhl's four-stage model which explains how certain forms of popular music change from one generation to the next. The four stages are: innovation, diffusion, adaptation, and restriction. According to Steingress, from 1850 - 1880 flamenco became a product of innovation by a bohemian, hybrid, "flamenco" subculture in Andalucia, strongly influenced by Gypsy culture; this music was performed in the growing number of *"cafes cantantes"* which were becoming more popular at the end of the 19th century. The next stage, from 1881 - 1921, is the time when more people around Spain began to hear flamenco music thanks to the success of cafes cantantes which began to attract people to the cities who were seeking novel leisure activities. Production companies made the first recordings of flamenco during this period, which also brought about the decadence of the previously ubiquitous Gypsy style of singing flamenco (*cante hondo*).

Steingress describes the third phase (1922 - 1954) as the time when flamenco becomes more popular and more adapted to the tastes of the wider public, thanks to the increased commercialization of flamenco through sales of recordings and diffusion by radio. This period inspired writers like Antonio Mairena and his followers to strongly criticize the decadent state of flamenco music which had lost its Gypsy character. In the fourth stage, from 1955 - 1980, the Mairenist perspective gains more popularity; the idea of "reaching back to the roots" is promoted through a popular TV series on flamenco, while certain influential flamenco artists make an effort to create music that "renews the (Gypsy) roots" of flamenco. By the end of this period Mairena's influence wanes and the postmodern period begins, which is characterized by new

forms of flamenco that are more open to assimilate musical techniques from other traditions creating hybrids of flamenco-pop, flameco-jazz, flamenco-classical, etc. (Steingress, 2007)

I went to about a dozen different Flamenco events in New York between April 2014 and August 2014, and I observed a wide range of artistic expression that was promoted as "flamenco." From the perspective of flamencologists like Steingress, Washabaugh, and Papapavlou, the scene in New York City supports the idea that flamenco music can thrive in a variety of venues, each with its own ambience, audience, and performance practice. A brief overview of my fieldwork provides a glimpse into the eclectic nature of the flamenco scene in New York. As I mentioned in the introduction, the New York flamenco scene embodies the central idea of cultural hybridization that Steingress and other the flamencologists mentioned above, consider to be a defining characteristic of flamenco music, both in postmodern flamenco today, and since its inception.

Rebeca Vallejo concert series: "The Flame: Jazz Infused Flamenco."

I interviewed Rebeca Vallejo in September of 2014 during the soundcheck for one of the shows from the flamenco series that she curates called "The Flame," which showcases music that she describes as "jazz infused flamenco." Rebeca is a performing artist who was born in Madrid and grew up there, but her family on both sides has roots in Andalusia. She sings in a variety of styles, and she grew up immersed in flamenco music because of her family's Andalusian heritage. The bio from her website describes in detail the variety of influences that have shaped Rebeca Vallejo as an artist.

> Madrid born vocalist and composer Rebeca Vallejo is a most versatile and innovative performer. Known for combining her ancestral Flamenco roots, her deep love and understanding of Brazilian music, with the language of Jazz, Rebeca Vallejo deftly weaves

all these elements into a sound that is truly unique…. Born into a family of singers in Madrid, Spain, Rebeca was immediately immersed in the rich musical language of Flamenco, learning at the feet of her grandfather, himself a Flamenco singer.

...Rebeca began collaborating and performing with the most sought after musicians of the Latin-Jazz scene… It was there that she discovered the third corner of a musical triangle that, together with Jazz and Flamenco, would shape her musical foundation… Rebeca Vallejo is the creator and bandleader of the musical projects EuroLatinJazz and EuroLatinFunk, an accomplished composer/Jazz arranger (among her composition projects are 300 children songs written for the national franchise "The Language Workshop") and for two years she was the main vocalist of the Flamenco Dance Company "Día Flamenco". (Vallejo, 2013)

When I asked Rebeca about the *gitano / payo* question, and the idea that "real" flamenco music is Gypsy music, she was quick to disagree. She recognized the contributions of Gypsy artists, but clearly stated that she is not an purist because, in her opinion, flamenco is music which has always come from the mixing of cultures and traditions. When Rebeca introduced the performers at the Flame concerts, she talked about her desire to "push the boundaries" of musical styles in the series. She stated that she makes a conscious decision to work with artists who are open to mixing musical styles from different traditions in their performances, which, as reflected in her bio, is something she does in her own career as a musician. Rebeca's open-minded perspective on flamenco and her belief in its ability to intermesh with other musical traditions is reflected in different ways in each of the Flame concerts that I attended at Cornelia Street Cafe for the bi-monthly series that she curates, "The Flame: Jazz Infused Flamenco."

The first performance that I went to was on Saturday, April 26th at 6 PM to see a concert that showcased the music of Ariadna Castellanos, a pianist and composer from Madrid. She played songs from her latest album called "Flamenco en Black and White," in one long set of music that lasted for about an hour. Castellanos' piano was the central voice for all of the songs and she was accompanied by bass, and percussion. Even though Castellanos' music was clearly

inspired by a combination of Jazz and Flamenco elements, it is fair to say that this concert sounded much more like Jazz than Flamenco. The Flamenco part of the performance was more subtle, mostly based on flamenco sounding, minor harmonic progressions with "Andalucian cadences."

Another performance in the Flame series featured Lara Bello, who is a Spanish folk / pop, singer-songwriter from Andalucia; she sang her own compositions and played piano, accompanied by percussion and bass. Rebeca's non-purist perspective on flamenco was clearly represented in this performance, because the typical traditional flamenco elements like hand clapping, virtuoso guitar, and loud singing were completely absent. Lara Bello has a melancholic, soft, clear voice; she sang songs about love and friendship and other autobiographical material. Some of the harmonic progressions of her songs resembled some typical flamenco patterns, and the use of the "cajon" in the percussion section was also a strong reference to more traditional styles of flamenco.

On Saturday, Sept 20th I went to another concert from Rebeca Vallejo's series, "The Flame: Jazz Infused Flamenco," at the Cornelia Cafe in Greenwich Village. In this performance the Classical and Jazz guitarist Diego Barber, and the Jazz pianist Fabian Almanzan played for almost an hour; the music was very relaxed, and the many meandering melodies made it sound like they were improvising most of the time. They did not introduce any of their songs and it was hard to discern any typical or traditional sounds that would resemble what many flamenco fans would consider to be true flamenco music. Perhaps the strongest reference to flamenco was the fact that one of the musicians played guitar.

Auxi Fernandez, Dance Performance at St. Mazie Bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn

On the other end of the spectrum, represesenting a more traditional perspective on flamenco arts, I interviewed a flamenco dancer from Cadiz, Spain, Auxi Fernandez. I spoke with Auxi Fernandez after a flamenco dance class that she taught at the flamenco dance school Rosa Flamenca, in Midtown Manhattan in July 2014. She described many details of her life as professional dancer, and how she learned to dance in several different dance schools in Cadiz, Andalucia. I asked her if she had Gypsy roots, and she said, "no," in a tone that made it seem like an irrelevant question. Her response to my question, "what is flamenco?" was a personal, intimate description of how flamenco made a difference in her life as an individual. There was no discussion of the roots of flamenco, and whether it was a *gitano* or *payo* art form. I asked her to describe parties or special events in her life where flamenco dancing played an important role. She said that that question should be answered by a *gitano* because her experience of flamenco dancing revolved around professional performances, and that flamenco was not part of her everyday family life. She said that in some ways she envies the *gitano* experience of flamenco because Gypsies live immersed in flamenco music on a daily basis, at a family gathering, parties, dinners, etc. In her bio on her web site Auxi describes how she started dancing flamenco when she was five years old, and took lessons at several different respected dance schools in her native city of Cadiz. At fifteen she was already dancing professionally in restaurants and tablaos famous for having the best flamenco music and dance. She began her international career in 2001 when she joined the renowned Sara Baras dance company in Madrid. She has collaborated extensively with famous Jazz artists including Chick Corea and Jorge Pardo. Now she lives in New York City and dances every week, tours internationally, and is studying to be an actress

(Fernandez, 2014). Auxi's professional life as a dancer is a clear example of the postmodern global reach of flamenco that Aoyama and Steingress write about. Her career has taken her from a small town in Andalucia, to perform in famous *tablaos* (dance halls) all around Spain, and much further to venues across the globe. (Fernandez, 2013)

One performance that I saw of Auxi was at St. Mazie, a bar and restaurant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, with a weekly late show called "Flamenco Fridays." On June 27th Auxi and "La Argentinita" danced on a small stage accompanied by guitar, a male singer, and a percussionist playing the "cajon." The dancers took turns dancing for about 2 hours with several short breaks. The audience at St. Mazie was the youngest that I observed all summer; they were mostly college and early career age people ("hipsters") who sat at the bar and at tables near the small stage and paid close attention to the performance, and applauded enthusiastically. The performance was close to what many purists who seek "traditional" forms of flamenco would appreciate: virtuosic, loudly strummed guitar and strict flamenco rhythms clapped or played on the "cajon," with traditional dance (interpreted by a woman dancer in a flowing, boldly colored dress), and a man singing loudly in a deep and raspy vocal timbre. These elements represent some of the main characteristics of the Mairenist, purist perspective resembling what some scholars consider to be the "true" expression of flamenco music, performed in the authentic Gypsy style (*agitanado*).

From what I observed during the summer of 2014, the state of flamenco arts in New York seems to support the ideas expressed by Washabaugh, and especially Steingress, when they describe flamenco as an inherently hybridized art form. If flamenco emerged in the 1800s as a musical genre that was the result of various musical cultures coming together, this characteristic

has continued and can be heard in the New York City flamenco music scene today. When I compare the theories that describe the hybrid quality inherent in flamenco music, with my experience of the scene in New York City, the idea of “postmodern flamenco” resonates strongly. The variety of acts that were billed as “flamenco” was surprising. The show “A Night in Andalucia” in the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts in Queens was held on a large stage with a string quartet, piano, two guitars, and a mix of ballet, salsa, and flamenco dancers. The bar concert at Manolo Tapas in Washington Heights was billed as “Rumba Flamenco,” but all we heard was covers of Spanish pop music, accompanied by flamenco sounding guitar strumming and the “cajon.” The last concert at Cornelia Cafe, curated by Rebeca Vallejo sounded like extra-light, free-jazz, improvisation for piano and classical guitar, and it was billed as “Jazz infused Flamenco.”

According to Steingress, one of the defining characteristics of the flamenco tradition is the fact that it is a hybrid, and has been a hybrid since it emerged as a commercialized art form in the mid 1800s - in New York this is still the case today. Auxi Fernandez and Rebeca Vallejo represent different points in the spectrum of hybridization that can evolve in the flamenco genre: Auxi’s carreer as a flamenco dancer has brought her to venues all across the globe where she has shared the stage with Jazz musicians and East Indian dancers, yet in her interview she stated that many times in New York, shows that are promoted as “flamenco,” are not “real” flamenco. Rebeca, on the other hand, is comfortable promoting her series of “Jazz Infused Flamenco” by hiring artists whose performances do not fit the traditional flamenco style at all. This variety is what makes New York an apt setting to manifest Steingress’ theories on postmodern flamenco, and the hybridization that is characteristic of flamenco music. From my experience, it is clear

that there are many forms of flamenco to behold in New York City, except one: the "everyday life flamenco" that is practiced by gypsy families, which Auxi referred to as different from her experience as a performer of flamenco. New York offers an excellent stage for myriad expressions of flamenco as a spectacle and a cultural commodity, but, as far as I know, New York City does not offer the ethnologist the opportunity to experience flamenco as a day to day expression of the life of a community, the way it does in gypsy communities in Spain.

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