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The Rosalía Polemic: Defining Genre Boundaries and Legitimacy in Flamenco

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Abstract. In 2018 Spanish singer Rosalía attained international popularity with her innovative flamenco-fusion album *El mal querer*. Within the flamenco world, the Rosalía vogue provoked vehement and ongoing polemics involving whether or not her music should be regarded as “flamenco,” whether she had the social credentials to be accepted as a flamenco innovator, and whether it was proper for her to adopt the persona of a ghetto-girl Gypsy in her hit music video, “Malamente.” These controversies reveal much about flamenco culture and the tensions inhering to its status as both a concert art form and a traditional idiom embedded in Gitano subculture.

Resumen. En 2018 la cantante española Rosalía adquirió fama internacional con su álbum *El mal querer* y su innovadora propuesta de flamenco fusión. El auge de Rosalía ha provocado intensas polémicas dentro del mundo flamenco, muchas de las cuales continúan vigentes, y cuestionan aspectos tales como si su música puede ser considerada “flamenco,” si la artista posee los atributos sociales necesarios para ser aceptada como pionera del género, o hasta qué punto su uso del estereotipo “chica-de-barrio gitano” en el videoclip *Malamente* es adecuado. La controversia provocada por estas cuestiones revela muchos aspectos de la cultura flamenca, especialmente sobre las tensiones que emergen de su doble estatus como música profesional para concierto y como lenguaje tradicional de la subcultura gitana.

In 2018 Spanish singer Rosalía Vila Tobella—known simply as Rosalía—burst on the global pop music scene with her album *El mal querer* (roughly, “the bad love”) attaining massive popularity not only throughout much of the

Spanish-speaking world but also among audiences in greater Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. With the possible and quite distinct exception of balladeer Julio Iglesias, no Spanish musician had ever attained such international stardom. The Rosalía phenomenon, aside from generating much national pride among Spaniards, also caused a significant stir in the flamenco world, since, stylistically, *El mal querer* constituted an innovative fusion of flamenco and pop (especially trap, the medium-tempo, synth-heavy, often gloomy-sounding rap substyle). Certainly, no flamenco-related album had ever achieved such global appeal. However, among the legions of ardent flamenco fans, Rosalía's vogue, far from evoking unanimous approbation, provoked an angry polemic that has raged in newspaper editorials, social media, and other forums. Part of the controversy has concerned the contested definition of “flamenco” and whether that genre should either include or exclude such a hybrid entity as *El mal querer*. A somewhat distinct but overlapping debate has involved the hit song and video “Malamente” (Badly), in which Rosalía adopted the persona of a ghetto-girl Gypsy, provoking accusations of “cultural appropriation” or, more properly, what could be seen as latter-day blackface or “Gypsy-face” minstrelsy.¹

The ensuing polemic ranged from astute, dispassionate argumentation to foul ad hominem insults and even racist slurs, with the underlying issues often being obscured by straw-man attacks, misrepresentations, and a degree of confusion of the various points of contention. While some of the brouhaha seemed to rehash familiar arguments about tradition versus innovation, *l'affaire Rosalía* clearly exposed unresolved issues and tensions that lie at the core of conceptions of flamenco in all its sociomusical dimensions. Indeed, much of the imprecision pervading the polemic, while confounding in its way, itself illustrated the prodigious complexity of issues at stake and the way that they involve sensitive social considerations.

One of the goals of this article is to disentangle, clarify, and articulate the various points of contention that, explicitly or implicitly, lie at the heart of the Rosalía debate. In part, this endeavor involves exploring the reasons why “defining flamenco,” rather than being a petty word game indulged in by fetishists, is such a deeply contentious issue, embedded as it is in broader social dynamics. This investigation also seeks to elucidate the contradictions, complexities, and sensitivities involved in the “cultural appropriation” debate and the senses in which Rosalía's “Malamente” opened old wounds regarding ethnicity and exploitation in Spanish culture. This article also offers a cross-cultural perspective on the polemic, suggesting how it reveals certain parallels with dynamics in other music genres—especially African American ones—and at the same time illustrates senses in which flamenco culture is unique. In the process, it seeks to demonstrate how controversies about music can serve to expose broader sociocultural sensitivities and contestations.

“Authenticity,” Universality, and Social Embedding in Flamenco

A central argument of this essay is that underlying the Rosalía polemic is a set of tensions inhering to flamenco’s social history and current status. From its nineteenth-century inception to the present, flamenco’s performance contexts have spanned a broad sociomusical continuum. At one end of this gamut has been the private festive reunion—quintessentially (but not exclusively) in a Gitano (Spanish Roma or Gypsy) home—where flamenco music and dance are cultivated as an amateur, participatory, quasi-folkloric art. In these events, flamenco is sung and danced as a cherished family tradition, with lyrics, tunes, and dance moves handed down from generation to generation and grandmothers and children taking turns singing and dancing to the rowdy approbation of all present. At the other end of the performance spectrum are the concert hall and mass media, where flamenco, as a professional entertainment idiom, has often been subject to commercial pressures and incentives and occasionally hybridized with commercial pop genres. The centrality of the Gitano *hogar* (home, hearth) as a locus for flamenco authenticity and creation has been much exaggerated and idealized,² but it persists both as a genuine social milieu, however attenuated nowadays, and as a valorizing image that, in its own way, continues to lend the genre much expressive meaning for its enthusiasts. The sociomusical realm between these two antipodes—the domestic reunion and the commercial stage and screen—is characterized by much felicitous interaction and bidirectional flow, as well as by a considerable degree of tension, especially as intensified by perceived dualities of Gitano and non-Gitano (or *payo*), amateur and professional, and Andalusian and non-Andalusian realms.

Underlying all these binaries is a distinction between flamenco as, on the one hand, an entity whose history and current expressivity are seen as embedded in social, extramusical contexts and, on the other hand, flamenco as a “universal” stage idiom of prodigious richness and sophistication.³ To clarify with some examples: A flamenco *mineras* lyric depicting a woman weeping by the mouth of a mine for her husband who has perished therein is “universal” in the sense that a listener can be moved by the abstract emotions of pity and loss and does not need to have personally experienced such a tragedy. At the same time, the flamenco enthusiast’s appreciation of such a lyric may be enhanced and enriched by the knowledge that situations like that portrayed were in fact an actual part of the origin of an entire category of flamenco songs of the Levant mining region. Similarly, there is a common melodic “tag” (*coletilla*) sung in flamenco tangos (with the vocables “yeli, yeli . . .”).⁴ Its appeal is at once “universal” and purely “musical” in being catchy, but it can also be enhanced and deepened for many flamenco listeners by the awareness that this refrain derives from its traditional use in Gitano wedding celebrations.⁵

While, as I shall suggest, there are many points of sociomusical comparison between flamenco and jazz, a significant distinction would be the persistent importance of this dimension of meaning in which flamenco—to a far greater extent than in modern jazz—remains strongly embedded in domestic and ethnic minority subcultural tradition, including ongoing performance at family parties and a broader sense of the historical and aesthetic importance of that context. As one YouTube commenter wrote, “Flamenco is a living music, with a soul. It’s also a way of life, a very pure feeling. It’s a culture, full of history and richness.”⁶

Flamenco scholar Juan Vergillos identifies three categories of tensions in flamenco: that between a Romantic and emotional as opposed to an empirical approach to the art; that between the potential universality of flamenco’s aesthetic appeal and its status as an art form for discriminating insiders; and that between flamenco’s technical aspects and its subjective celebrated valuing of “authenticity” (1999:43–44; see also Aix Gracia 2014:208, who characterizes these issues as “primordial debates”). One manifestation of these tensions can emerge if and when an artist, especially a social “outsider,” achieves great renown in the commercial realm but is not adept in the other, community-based contexts, in which case there may be great mistrust of and ambivalence toward this person. Another manifestation is a prodigious concern with defining flamenco, particularly in terms of how hybrid forms of flamenco, or even poorly performed traditional flamenco as rendered by a commercial diva, might alternately endanger, enrich, or coexist comfortably with the established neotraditional mainstream. In such considerations, the credentials and identity of the innovator may be seen as significant. Finally, there is great sensitivity and controversy about the extent and nature of the Gitano role and presence in flamenco, and this sensitivity can be inflamed when a non-Gitano superstar goes so far as to affect Gypsy identity for a commercial act. Rosalía, as I shall discuss, has pulled all these “triggers,” setting off a perfect storm of sorts through her phenomenal popularity and the particular nature of her art.

In this article I avoid interjecting my own opinions about Rosalía and her music, which is in fact of less interest to me than the polemic it has provoked. Instead I focus on “emic” discourse within the flamenco community itself to show how the discursive storm can be seen to reveal much about the distinctive sociomusical dynamics that animate the flamenco world and, on a broader level, about the tensions that can inhere to any music that is at once “universal” while deriving much of its expressive power from a celebration of its distinctive sociomusical roots.⁷

Defining Flamenco—and the Importance of Doing So

While the Rosalía debate involves various subtopics, the central controversy has been whether or not her hit album, *El mal querer*, should be regarded as

flamenco. To many Spaniards, as well as others, this might seem to be a massively trivial issue. Hence a typical YouTube comment, inserted amid the raging polemic: "What I don't get is the obsession you all have with labeling music. Why don't you just enjoy Rosalía and her music without having to label it?"⁸

This question, indeed, might seem to be eminently reasonable and would accord with Rosalía's own explicitly stated indifference as to how her music is classified. The basic problem, however, is that some flamenco fans ardently wish to claim her music for the art form, which, they argue, is in danger of becoming petrified and stale, while others wish to exclude it, fearing that fusion projects like hers could marginalize traditional flamenco, which they see as perpetually threatened by commercial fads and ephemeral hybrids. An ancillary dimension to this debate concerns Rosalía's forays into traditional flamenco, a few of which are generally regarded as substandard. Here again, an ontological dispute arises, with many partisans arguing that these performances are not merely "poorly sung flamenco" but actually not flamenco at all due to their lack of certain features such as expressive flair and rhythmic command, which, though somewhat intangible, are seen as intrinsic to the genre.

There may be no other music genre in the world in which establishing definitions and boundaries is seen as so important and is so vigorously contested.⁹ Such contestations have occurred not only at the vernacular level but also among the many intellectuals who, since the early twentieth century, have had a strikingly intense investment in flamenco.¹⁰ In many genres, of course, definitions—whether "critic-fan" ones or music-industry ones (Brackett 2016:11)—may be important and sometimes controversial. Hence, for example, in the "critic-fan" category, there would be the desire of some parties to define, delimit, and thereby protect the category of Anglo-American "folk music"; this desire generated anger at Bob Dylan for his performance of electrified folk-rock at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964. Other categorizations are more institutional, involving, for example, criteria for grants and government patronage, Spotify taxonomies, and competition forums. On a more general level, Jacques Derrida (1980:56–57) has proposed a "law of genre," according to which the very notion of "genre" introduces contestation in the form of norms and interdictions, on the one hand, and impurity and contamination, on the other.¹¹ Such processes and concerns lie at the heart of the flamenco debate and can be seen to be particularly basic to and pervasive in flamenco culture and also much imbricated in historical and ethnic tensions. Accordingly, some historical contextualization is necessary for a holistic understanding of the Rosalía debate.

As mentioned above, the flamenco scene has comprised a sociomusical continuum of performance contexts, ranging from the intimate family reunion to commercial, professional, and (from the early twentieth century) mass-mediated forums. This gamut of milieus has remained present ever since the 1860s, when

flamenco per se emerged as a stylized, sophisticated elaboration of various extant genres, including fandango variants and soulful *cantes* (song types) of *soleares* and *siguiriyas* that were primarily (but not only) associated with Gitano singers. In this formative period, flamenco coalesced in a set of contexts comprising at once a subculture of family fiestas, lumpen-proletarian taverns, and cabaret-type *cafés cantantes*, where the music and dance were performed by professionals for a paying public. Personnel, styles, and innovations traveled productively in both directions along the continuum between these milieus, but the social distances involved have also generated, as stated above, a degree of tension. This tension has been manifested and voiced in various ways over the generations but has often included the sentiment, however articulated, that "authentic" flamenco is to be found primarily in private, amateur contexts and that flamenco performed in commercial formats, particularly in hybrid or adulterated styles, may represent only an ersatz facsimile. As various scholars have discussed, this rather fanciful but persistent notion has clear roots in nineteenth-century Romanticism (Lavour [1976] 1999; Steingress 1991:79–110; Vergillos 1999). In many articulations, from the seminal writings of folklorist Antonio Machado y Álvarez (Demófilo, 1848–93) to later books by *flamencólogos* (flamencologists), authenticity and purity have often been explicitly linked to Gitano subculture (Caballero Bonald 1988; Leblon 1995; Lefranc 2000:34; Mairena and Molina [1963] 1979).¹²

From the 1920s, such sentiments persisted as the genre was increasingly packaged in the format of the *ópera flamenca*, a variety show presenting diverse popular songs, comedic acts, and diluted or brief flamenco items. Inspired—and, indeed, confused—by Romantic notions of purity and authenticity, poet and playwright Federico García Lorca and composer Manuel de Falla attempted to counter this trend and revive unadulterated *cante jondo* (deep song) in a competition in Granada in 1922 whose guidelines (subsequently much criticized; see Mitchell 1994:chap. 11) explicitly excluded professional singers. Marginalization of *cante jondo* and the dismay of traditional flamenco lovers continued in the subsequent decades, especially with the vogue of Pepe Marchena (1903–76), who, though revered today as a gifted artist, popularized a light, sentimental style of singing distinguished by a rococo abundance of decorative melismas, a softer voice production, and a preference for accessible fandangos rather than pathos-laden *cante jondo*.

The 1960s saw a return to orthodoxy, which was led by Gitano singer Antonio Mairena, with a standardization of the repertoire of *cantes* (Manuel 2010:107–14). It is essentially this canonic body of "neoclassical" or "traditional" (*por derecho*) flamenco that continues to constitute the mainstream idiom heard in flamenco festivals, competitions, *peñas* (semiprivate clubs), and tourist-oriented *tablaos* clubs, where, collectively, flamenco has since found a fairly stable market existence (at least until the coronavirus era). For many flamenco lovers,

this neotraditional genre (like mainstream, “straight-ahead” jazz, for its fans) is sufficiently rich and flexible enough that it can continue to accommodate new artists and attract ardent audiences, and it is in no particular need of revision or modernization, regardless of whatever worthy innovative styles may flourish in other milieus alongside it. Moreover, such aficionados would feel that while much eclectic or pop hybrid flamenco may be dynamic and meritorious, such crossover music should be kept independent of “flamenco” per se in terms of both performance contexts and taxonomic definitions.

In the 1970s, as Spain emerged from the culturally stultifying Franco era, a younger generation of artists—led by vocalist Camarón de la Isla (d. 1992) and guitarist Paco de Lucía (d. 2014)—while continuing to perform and record in neotraditional style, also felt constrained by its limits and pursued various sorts of innovative paths. As cultivated by them and others, the new genre of *nuevo flamenco* included pop-oriented rumbas and tangos, sui generis modernist projects of Enrique Morente and the duo Lole y Manuel, and various fusions with rock, North African Andalusian music, and jazz. Meanwhile, in separate performance and media contexts and following 1960s crossover artists such as Miguel de los Reyes and Bambino, various forms of *aflamencado* (flamenco-tinged, or “flamencoesque”) popular music continued to flourish, from sentimental *copla* songs to the “Gypsy rock” of artists such as Tijeritas, Triana, Smash, Los Chichos, Pata Negra, and Madrid-based *cañarroto* performers. In the 2000s these were succeeded by diverse sorts of *aflamencado* rap, reggaeton, and soul as performed by Pitingo, Moncho Chavea, Mala Rodríguez, Macaco, Luís Barrull, India Martínez, and many others.

In many respects, these various subgenres have coexisted comfortably with mainstream flamenco, and purists have been reassured by the fact that most of the flamenco-pop singers, such as Pitingo and Tijeritas, have also been skilled performers of traditional flamenco; some, such as Camarón, Paco de Lucía, and José Mercé, continued to perform in the circuit of festivals and venues devoted to that style. An analogy with jazz is again pertinent: the advent of funk, fusion, and various avant-garde styles from the 1970s did not kill acoustic, “straight-ahead” jazz, which continues as a well-established and still vital genre performed in clubs, taught in colleges, and studied and enjoyed by a stable and steadily replenishing set of enthusiasts.

At the same time, the tensions to which I have referred to have persisted in various ways. One manifestation has been a survival of the aforementioned mistrust, in some circles, of concert flamenco and a belief that “authentic” flamenco is only to be found in private gatherings. A somewhat typical articulation of this belief is Paul Hecht’s book *The Wind Cried* (1968), which describes the series of ineffably transcendental performances the author heard from obscure singers in taverns, Gitano homes, and other humble venues.¹³ Another representation, much in Mairena’s now-disputed “Gitanocentric” vein, is Pierre Lefranc’s volume

El cante jondo (2000), which conveys the notion evidently prevalent among his Gitano informants that any commercial performance of cante jondo is essentially prostitution: “In a public performance, Gitanos, probably since centuries ago, perform what they are asked to, but typically limit themselves to performing anodyne; later, they get together amongst themselves and delight in singing the real thing. I’ve seen this many times” (Lefranc 2000:34).

Accompanying this aesthetic has been the sense that flamenco, far from being merely an art form, is “a way of life” (as in the title of one of Don Pohren’s widely read books). Thus, whether or not one regards Gitanos as the creators of flamenco, every fan of the genre is well aware that it has been nourished by a world of private, quintessentially Gitano reunions and fiestas (including baptisms and weddings) and that many, if not most, of the top performers—not to mention legions of gifted amateurs—have been raised in Gitano households, where they began singing and dancing practically as soon as they could walk.¹⁴ I reiterate that there are many grounds on which these *mairenista* and Gitano-centric ideas, as advanced by Lefranc, Hecht, and others, could be and have been challenged, but what is important here is that they persist at some level in various forms in the flamenco world. In the process, they may actually enhance flamenco’s expressivity and meaning for many of its enthusiasts, but they also create the possibility of tension and antagonism when a social outsider achieves great fame as an innovator.

Given the pressures of the commercial mass media and flamenco’s own history of what purists regard as deformation and vulgarization in the ópera and Marchena phases, many lovers of traditional flamenco have felt that the genre is perpetually vulnerable and threatened by commercial pop trends. Defining flamenco and establishing its stylistic limits are thus seen as crucial custodial tasks, as reiterated in many flamencological publications. One such declaration was the 1996 “Manifiesto en Defensa del Cante Flamenco,” presented by a group of performers and flamencologists, which called for the concerted preservation of cante jondo and urged cultural organizations, mass media, and spokespersons “not to call these [commercial fusions] ‘flamenco,’ in order to avoid confusing those persons not well versed in the material” (de la Casa 1996). Several flamencologists in the journal *Revista de flamencología* have also argued this theme, including Bernard Leblon, who wrote:

The massive eruption of international-style Western music is at the point of rupturing the precarious balance that flamenco has been able to maintain in its milieu. Until recently flamenco has been able to absorb external modalities into its own system of modes and rhythms. . . . But now, more than ever, we need criteria to distinguish what is inside and outside of the genre. . . . Clearly, the so-called “flamenco-rock” is invariably more rock than flamenco in that it merely takes some superficial elements of flamenco, such as vocal turns or ornaments, and not its deeply Oriental essence. . . . [T]he inversion of terms signifies a rupture of balance. (1995:94)¹⁵

Such notions invite comparison with the dismay in the American jazz world provoked by the turn toward rock-oriented funk fusion in the 1970s. In the case of flamenco, however, the concern is that a mainstream turn toward pop or modernist experimentation would constitute not merely a stylistic development but also a “rupture” in the social continuum that currently links professional stage flamenco to its quasi-folkloric counterpart—however Romantically imagined—in the Gitano community.¹⁶

As noted above, many purists may be relatively content with the current status quo in which many flamenco artists release innovative and inspired nuevo flamenco albums while continuing to perform traditional “por derecho” flamenco in the core contexts of festivals, peñas, and competitions. Opposing these purists are those enthusiasts who, while cherishing traditional flamenco, believe that flamenco itself, like any art form, will ossify unless it evolves and changes with the times. As they argue, flamenco guitar and dance have developed and modernized dramatically since the 1970s, but cante (singing)—the core idiom of the art form—has remained essentially static in terms of both style and the established, inviolable repertoire of song types (palos or cantes). Essential to such modernization of the art, progressives assert, is a relatively inclusive definition of flamenco that can accommodate rather than snobbishly exclude the various innovations and fusions that have in fact been occurring. In this view, articulated in such works as José Luis Ortiz Nuevo’s *Alegato contra la pureza* (Allegation against purism, 2010), it is the moldy-fig purists rather than the innovative younger singers who constitute the grave danger to flamenco.

Enter Rosalía

Into this minefield of competing aesthetic and sociomusical ideologies burst the figure of Rosalía, who in 2018 quickly became the greatest pop music—and, arguably, flamenco—diva in Spain’s history. Rosalía (b. 1993) is not a social “insider” to flamenco, being born to a middle-class Catalanian payo family in a town near Barcelona. From adolescence she took classes, like many Spanish youths nowadays, in flamenco dance and singing and from around 2013 sang in various stage productions. In 2016 she collaborated with guitarist-producer Raúl Refree for the album *Los Ángeles*, in which she sang various flamenco items in a more or less conventional style with the idiosyncratic guitar accompaniment of Refree. (Refree’s somewhat minimalist and rough guitar playing presented its own ontological challenge, for if regarded as “flamenco,” it might well be seen as crude.)¹⁷ Her real stardom came with the 2018 album *El mal querer* (henceforth *EMQ*), coproduced with El Guincho (Pablo Díaz-Reixa), with artful videos by a producer team named Canadá. She has subsequently collaborated with international stars such as J. Balvin and Pharrell Williams.

Rosalía’s output falls into a few distinct categories. First, on *Los Ángeles* and in various live (and YouTube) performances, she has sung standard flamenco, most of which is generally seen as presentable but not outstanding and a few items of which, as discussed below, are arguably weak. Second, a few of her songs on *EMQ*—especially the hit “Malamente” (also discussed below)—are basically pop, with only minor flamenco touches. Lastly are the majority of songs on *EMQ*, which have clear flamenco elements and, depending on one’s point of view, might be regarded as flamenco moderately hybridized. When partisans angrily declare, “Rosalía is/isn’t flamenco!,” they are generally referring to this last category of her music, for which she is in fact best known.

EMQ is, by almost any standards, an original, inspired, and compelling album that has invited comparisons between Rosalía and Björk. It is a “concept album” whose songs (“chapters,” as explained in the liner notes) very loosely follow the plot of an obscure and anonymous thirteenth-century Occitanian novella that, coincidentally, happens to be named *Flamenca* (here, “Flemish woman” and the protagonist’s name). The poem narrates the sad tale of Flamenca as she marries—with certain ominous premonitions—an ardent suitor who then turns pathologically suspicious and imprisons her in a tower. *EMQ* is in its way a feminist tribute to Flamenca’s agency as she defiantly denounces her cruel fate.

Musically, several of the songs are at once innovative and steeped in flamenco tradition. “Que no salga la luna” (May the moon not rise) is an up-tempo *bulerías* whose accompaniment consists of a sampled loop of a single *compás* (roughly, measure) of guitar from a vintage recording. “Reniego” (I deny) is a soulful rendering of a venerable *siguiriyas* but accompanied by a string ensemble rather than a guitar.¹⁸ Both songs invoke well-known Gitano singers in their use of words from *caló* (Spanish Roma dialect).¹⁹ “Di mi nombre” (Say my name) is a tuneful flamenco-style tango at once synth-accompanied, auto-tuned, and redolent of a Gitano fiesta.²⁰ In “Maldición” (Curse), Rosalía sings a fandango to various sorts of nontraditional instrumental accompaniments adorned, like some of the other cuts, with assorted sound effects. In similarly eclectic style is the nonalbum single “Aunque es de noche” (Although it’s nighttime), a modernist tango-style setting of a poem written in 1577 by Sor Juana de la Cruz that had also been sung in *afamencado* style by Enrique Morente in 1992. All of the songs foreground Rosalía’s agile, somewhat delicate voice and are picturized with Canadá’s artful videos, which variously show dance scenes, gloomy surrealistic montages, or grim, static, Frida Kahloesque portraits of Rosalía with creepy animated details.

El mal querer: Flamenco or Not?

As mentioned, *EMQ* was by no means the first innovative quasi-flamenco production, and a few of its innovations—such as the string ensemble accompaniment to

"Reniego"—could be seen as closely derivative of earlier productions. However, *EMQ* has attained a popularity incomparably greater than any prior *aflamencado* recording, and the existence of social media (which Rosalía herself has skillfully used) has enabled the controversy surrounding it to be argued in an unprecedentedly public and sustained manner.

By late 2018, as Rosalía was busily pursuing new, high-profile collaborations, much of the flamenco world was engaged in a paroxysm of debate about her album. On the whole, its aesthetic merit has not been at issue, although the support of some of her fans (including a few senior flamencologists) seems to border on infatuation and has been offset by a number of trolling "haters" who, according to some, exhibit a spiteful, crabs-in-a-bucket mentality. Nor is Rosalía herself an issue, as in published interviews she is generally articulate in her defense of innovation. She states, for instance: "I have a huge respect for flamenco, my whole career is based on it. Still, that doesn't mean that I'm not going to do the music that excites me just to maintain more acceptance or credibility. I think my work should speak for itself. All the artists from my generation are way more global than in the past, and we don't have prejudices when it comes to exploring different genres. We need to stand for this freedom."²¹

Rather than concerning Rosalía's persona herself or her public statements, the polemic has involved the ontological definition of flamenco as outlined above and whether Rosalía accordingly is to be regarded as a *cantaora* (flamenco singer) or a *cantante* (singer of other genres).²² Rosalía herself has proclaimed indifference as to how others label her music, stating that it is not necessarily flamenco; instead, it "is an *aflamencado* style. . . . I do music without thinking exactly what genre it is."²³ Such statements, however, do not resolve the controversy for others who want to either claim her for flamenco or exclude her from it. Their respective arguments are reiterated in many dozens of social media posts, including comments on her YouTube videos, on online journalistic articles and blogs, and on Facebook.

Many partisans simply state their position in categorical, unequivocal terms:

ROSALÍA IS NOT A FLAMENCO CANTAORA. She is a cantante who uses remnants of flamenco to mix with things foreign to us like "trap" (*madre mía*, what is that?) or "reggaeton" (a spurious music imposed on us by the imperialist "owners" of the media).

If you make paella with mayonnaise, it might be better, but it's no longer paella.

And on the other hand:

If you say that she is not flamenco, then it is flamenco that loses.

I think it's a lie that the purists try to impose on us, to say that it's not flamenco. There are [in *EMQ*] the palos; bulerías, segurías, tangos, fandangos. . . . [T]he lyrics are very flamenco: drama, passion, intensity, a very flamenco atmosphere . . . and

it's a work of research, knowledge, and respect. Yes, there is experimentation. It's a beautiful and daring product that lends new light, color, and youth to flamenco.

Several commenters argued that flamenco, like any art, needs to change with the times in order to remain vital:

To all the erudite purists who criticize Rosalía, the "purists" are the people who supposedly love flamenco and feel so assaulted when someone changes a piece of the puzzle that they think is theirs alone, and to them I'd like to say that they are the ones doing the most harm to flamenco, and if they had their way flamenco would only be listened to in some little Andalusian pub that only seats 30 people, where the artist is paid with a plate of potatoes. . . . Fortunately flamenco, like any art, or like life itself, is based in evolution, and in this case Rosalía is contributing many positive things and spreading it to many people, young and old.

Flamenco has been waiting for a phenomenon like Rosalía to return it to the places it has lost: contemporaneity, and the young.

Rosalía's stance is not only FLAMENCO in origin and in her masterful command of the genre, but also in her project of contemporaneity, rooted in what the art has always been: the child of mixture and hybridity.²⁴

Several YouTube commenters attest to being drawn to flamenco via Rosalía, while others have countered that flamenco (perhaps like jazz) is never going to have a mass following, already has a sufficient audience, and does not need to be promoted by a pop diva: "Filling a good Córdoba wine bottle with soda in order to please everyone is not the way to sell more wine." The debate continues, with various valid arguments being made on both sides:

This [the critics] is the same bunch of cognac purists who crucified [celebrated flamenco innovators] Camarón, Morente, Lole y Manuel, and El Lebrijano. Then years pass and they get on board the train, like vampires.

This type of statement is invariably followed by a retort: "Don't you dare compare Rosalía with Camarón!" Or

[the purists] flogged the brilliant Enrique Morente and he didn't surrender to those who claimed to have the keys of purism. Musics have to mix with each other and evolve with new concepts. What doesn't evolve, dies.

To which veteran flamenco chronicler and critic Estela Zatanía astutely responded, "They say that music needs to evolve. . . . I'm not sure music needs to do anything but move people" (2019). She later added,

Flamenco *does* change, all the time, but not because someone comes along and tips over the game board. It changes almost unnoticed, inexorably. Anyhow, Mozart didn't need to be updated, and he still has a place on the hit parade. (personal communication with the author, June 2019)

For some, the desire to define and delimit flamenco is linked to a sense of the menace that commercial hybrids have posed to flamenco ever since its

inception; thus, it is feared, if EMQ is to be regarded as flamenco, then the use of synthesizers, sampled loops, sound effects, and precomposed ditties—coupled with a rather ordinary level of singing—could invade the flamenco festivals and clubs (despite their current rules excluding such things), and traditional voice-and-guitar flamenco could be sadly marginalized and devalued.

Another argument involves beliefs about the constituent elements of flamenco and whether or not EMQ possesses these. In one YouTube video, “Areh” explains, in technical physiological terms, how Rosalía’s voice production differs from that characteristic of flamenco singing.²⁵ Others, such as Alberto García Reyes, music critic for the Sevilla newspaper *ABC*, focus on stylistic criteria that would align Rosalía less with flamenco than with the long tradition of light, aflamencado pop:

Rosalía has taken some classic flamenco pieces and brought them to her domain, which is pop. This can confuse people, because her songs directly invoke traditional flamenco pieces but are reinterpreted in a manner outside its basic rules. She can be classified as an *aflamencada cantante* but not a *cantaora*. . . . She trivializes the cantes by turning them into *canciones* [songs]. . . . Her basic trick is to eliminate the rhythmic tension intrinsic to flamenco and base herself just on the melodies. . . . She appropriates flamenco but doesn’t belong to it either musicologically or conceptually. (2018b)

Other YouTube commenters echo these ideas:

Technically, [“Reniego”] may be a *siguiriyas*, but emotionally? That’s the question.

Merely using the rhythm of a *bulerías* por soleá [in “Pienso en tu mirá”] doesn’t make something flamenco, just like putting a Mercedes logo on a car doesn’t make it a Mercedes.

Nowadays anything is flamenco. If someone plays tennis, with *bulerías*-style *palmas* [rhythmic hand-clapping], it’s flamenco.

Finally, as I have argued, the particular intensity of the debate about defining flamenco derives not only from a commonplace tradition versus innovation argument but also from its social dimension and the tension inhering to the broad continuum of its performance contexts. As discussed, these rest on the belief (however exaggerated and idealized) of the importance of the Gitano home and community and an ambivalence toward performers and productions that are situated primarily or exclusively on the commercial, mass-mediated antipode of the spectrum. Those who celebrate the Gypsy hearth as a primary source for flamenco authenticity are likely to be particularly annoyed by the media attention lavished on Rosalía instead of the legions of superior neotraditional flamenco singers. Such media fawning culminates in sensationalistic headlines such as that of an article in the newspaper *El mundo today*: “Rosalía: The Catalan Who Invented Flamenco.”²⁶ The responses on social media are predictable:

And they have the balls to tell us that she’s the revolutionary of flamenco. It’s completely offensive, a complete lack of respect for flamenco culture. Everything about

her is marketing, and the capitalist power to whitewash flamenco . . . appropriating from flamenco to make a kind of plastic culture.

The girl has talent, but not like they want us to believe. There are hundreds of musicians here with much more talent, and they haven’t had a tenth of the impact she’s had, and that has a name: marketing. . . . Just look at any of her videos, and in the credits you’ll see the names of about 80 people.

[EMQ] is a product of the capitalist record industry and has nothing to do with flamenco, just the APPROPRIATION of stereotyped winks toward flamenco, Gitanos, and Andalusians.

I can’t stand that she gets more opportunities than the Gitanas who are singing about their roots from childhood; it’s a *paya* who takes flamenco singing classes and gets more credit than a Gitana who sings lyrics that narrate the history of her and her community.²⁷

The Importance of “Credentials,” and Again, Defining Bulerías and Flamenco

Much of the mistrust of if not open hostility toward the Rosalía vogue derives not only from her heavy music-industry backing but also from her questionable status as a singer of traditional flamenco. Such sentiments, in accordance with the conception of flamenco as deeply rooted in social history, entail the notion that in order to sing flamenco and/or flamenco fusion, one should have certain legitimizing credentials in terms of sociomusical background. The extreme version of this belief is the idea that flamenco is an essentially Gitano art form and that very few *payos* manage to perform it credibly. However, whenever someone advances this notion on social media, commenters roundly (and, it must be said, convincingly) demolish it, citing the numerous non-Gitano artists, from Silverio Franconetti (1831–89) to Paco de Lucía, who have in fact made great contributions to the art.

A more moderate form of credential hierarchy is based on region—specifically, the idea that one should be Andalusian or at least of Andalusian parentage to sing flamenco well and that Catalans, many of whom are disdainful of Spain and “Spaniards,” are particularly far removed from flamenco culture. Rosalía, of middle-class, non-Gitano, Catalan background, is thus especially likely to be seen as an “outsider.” However, this regional argument is itself problematic and complex, partly because Barcelona hosts a large population of migrant Andalusians (including Gitanos) and has long been a center for flamenco. Moreover, a few popular and respected modern singers, especially Miguel Poveda and Mayte Martín, are *payos* born in Catalonia, though Poveda, of southern Spanish parents, grew up in an Andalusian neighborhood, and Martín’s father was Andalusian.²⁸ Yet another recurring conception of credentials is the notion that, as with the blues, “if you haven’t suffered, then you can’t be a good singer” (*si no*

pasas fatigas, no puedes ser buen cantaor). Ideally one is a Gitano born in a cave and raised in poverty. While it might be easy to refute this notion, the point is that it persists as an active ideology in flamenco discourse and aesthetics (see, e.g., Bohórquez 2020).

Particularly pertinent to the Rosalía debate is the idea that even if some payos can sing flamenco well, innovations within the genre are only truly legitimate and trustworthy if they are undertaken by artists such as Camarón and Morente who have earned prior respect as performers of traditional flamenco.²⁹ The notion that a singer who seeks to innovate should first be adept at traditional cante might be challenged by some people,³⁰ but it is nevertheless pervasive.

Thus, much of the public assessment of Rosalía, including regarding the validity of her innovative items, has involved an intense scrutiny of her forays into conventional flamenco singing. As mentioned, Rosalía took flamenco classes for several years and had performed in tablaos. In various YouTube videos and in some of the cuts on *Los Ángeles*, she sings some items in a fairly straightforward, presentable, and “unproblematic” manner. However, in a few of her videos her singing is arguably “problematic” in ways that not only generated attacks on her legitimacy as an innovator but also raised, yet again, ontological questions about how flamenco is to be defined and whether some forms of mediocre singing should be considered flamenco at all if they are lacking in certain constitutive features.

At issue are two formally released (rather than amateur uploaded) videos of her singing bulerías onstage with guitar accompaniment. Bulerías is an up-tempo cante that places particular demands on the singer, who must artfully juxtapose free-rhythmic and offbeat passages with moments that stress the accented beats in the syncopated $\frac{12}{8}$ compás. Many Andalusian Gitanos feel that bulerías is a Gitano specialty, and they take pride in having grown up in families in which they have been singing and dancing it in fiestas from childhood. As such, bulerías is seen by some as a sort of acid test for singers, who must cultivate a solid feel for its distinctive rhythm. Aside from the studio-edited “Que no salga la luna,” Rosalía released a live concert-hall bulerías, somewhat tentatively sung, that generated several hundred critical comments, perhaps especially from those who were already suspicious of her credentials as a cantaora and of her legitimacy as an innovator.³¹ Matters were not helped by a subsequent video in which, invited to sing informally at a Barcelona tabiao, she rather timidly reiterated a verse from her record and then stopped, saying she couldn’t recall any other lines.³² This arguably weak performance generated another barrage of merciless vituperation.³³ Animating much of the criticism has been the implicit notion that a “complete” singer would be at home both on the stage and in the quintessential context of the informal family reunion. The suspicion is that were Rosalía to find herself in such a festivity and sing so

unconvincingly, there would be much rolling of eyes and scoffing along the lines of, “Why, we have aunties here who sing bulerías better than you and who have never had occasion to set foot on a stage!” Accordingly, Rosalía has not sung on the circuit of peñas, clubs where invited artists perform traditional flamenco for hardcore enthusiasts.

Many critics of Rosalía’s bulerías videos asserted that she “doesn’t have compás” (*ella no tiene compás*), roughly meaning that she lacks a feel for the phrasing and rhythm of the palo.³⁴ A related accusation is that her bulerías lacks the intense expressivity (*pellizco, quejío, duende*) that flamenco, especially bulerías, should convey. What is relevant here is the argument that these alleged deficiencies mean not simply that her bulerías singing is poor but rather that it is not bulerías or flamenco at all. Further, it is alleged, by singing in this defective manner she is disrespecting the art form and should properly refrain from attempting to perform it. By contrast, this particular criticism would not be directed at, for example, an aged Gitano amateur who sang soulfully and seemed at home in the compás, no matter how poor was his intonation and how ruined was his voice. What is again asserted is a particular definition of flamenco that has not only an aesthetic but also a social dimension, requiring qualities that are allegedly difficult for non-Gitanos to master.³⁵ The following YouTube comments are representative:

This is not a bulerías; she has no rhythm, nor quejío, she gets lost in the compás, and if this girl had respect for flamenco she wouldn’t sing this grotesquerie. . . . Let her sing what she likes but not try to fool people, this is neither bulerías nor flamenco.

This isn’t flamenco, what it is in fact is a lack of respect for this beautiful and difficult art. She is cheapening and spoiling an art that is the patrimony of humanity.

Flamenco is not only primary material, but also a form of expressing it. And therein are my doubts about Rosalía, though I recognize her artistry and like her music.

She is a pop hipster, a cantante who does melismas with a sweet and transparent voice, who sings well, but pretends to be a *flamenca*. Great artist, but NOT FLAMENCO.

If you want the advice of a flamenco guitarist, leave Spain, or don’t dabble in flamenco, because here you might have success in *copla* [a sentimental song genre] or *chirigota* [a rowdy Cádiz Carnival chorus], but otherwise you won’t fool people here because we are in Spain, and Andalucía, even if you can fool some Catalans. . . . Have some respect for the art.

In order to sing flamenco you need duende, art, sparks, and pellizco, and she lacks it all.

I don’t know how this chick doesn’t die of embarrassment! And she has the impudence to try to sing flamenco without any idea how! Let her sing trap, but not flamenco, no! *Muy malamente!* [Very badly!]

May she not be so shameless as to record flamenco without knowing shit about it. What a disgrace! . . . If you can't sing flamenco then don't, it's that simple!

Her flamenco is shit! Leave flamenco to the flamencos!

As suggested above, many other flamenco fans have criticized such comments not only for their venomous tone but also for their allegedly snobbish, elitist, and custodial determination to police the boundaries of flamenco.³⁶ Purists, of course, must acknowledge and accept that flamenco (including *bulerías*) has been sung credibly not only by many payos but even by some earnest Japanese aficionados. What generates suspicion of and hostility toward Rosalía—or, more properly, the Rosalía vogue—is her uneven flamenco singing, her prodigious music industry backing, her pop diva status, and the way that these combine to provoke a sentiment that she is an interloper in flamenco and, by extension, that she does not have the credentials to undertake innovations and, accordingly, that her innovations inherently lack legitimacy. Such sentiments have been exacerbated by the particular sort of posing that she undertakes in her biggest hit, “Malamente,” which generated its own somewhat tangential but not unrelated controversy.

“Malamente” and Minstrelsy

“Malamente” is, for most Rosalía fans, an unproblematically appealing song and even a source of Spanish nationalistic pride, as it won the 2018 Best Alternative Song Latin Grammy and as of late 2020 has registered over 150 million YouTube views. As its tens of thousands of YouTube comments reveal, it has captivated audiences around the world with its simultaneously catchy and somewhat spooky sonorities and video picturization. At the same time, a casual perusal of such comments also reveals that the song has provoked a heated polemic, specifically through Rosalía's impersonation of an Andalusian or Gypsy ghetto-girl in a context of historical persecution of Gitanos and ongoing bigotry against them. Hence, some have accused her, whether coherently or not, of perpetrating an offensive form of “cultural appropriation.” As mentioned, this could also be characterized as a sort of latter-day Gypsy-face minstrelsy, with “minstrelsy” here meaning a commercial entertainment production in which a member of a dominant group impersonates a subaltern, purveying negative stereotypes in the process, as was the case with American blackface minstrelsy.³⁷

The issues involved in this controversy are complex and laden with contradictions. In that sense, they at once overlap with and parallel the extraordinarily complex ethnic dynamics of the evolution of flamenco itself, of the status of Gitanos in Spanish society, and of blackface minstrelsy in the United States.³⁸ As discussed below, one manifestation of this complexity is the confused nature of much of the polemic itself, whose discourse is full of both astute as well as

contradictory and poorly articulated arguments, red herrings, and—as if in frustration with these—crude personal insults.

A dispassionate discussion of the controversy must start with the song itself. As “chapter 1” in the saga of the ill-starred heroine, “Malamente's” lyrics obliquely portray the narrator setting off across a wobbly bridge toward her marriage amid various foreboding images and signs, including the ominous chorus, “badly, badly.” The artful video alternates various surrealistic snippets with scenes of Rosalía dancing with her female companions, singing in a truck cab, riding a motorcycle around a bullfighter, and being run down by a car. Most of the scenes are set in a *polígono*, that is, a housing project and industrial zone that is the typical habitat of working-class payos and many Andalusian Gitanos displaced from traditional neighborhoods like Seville's Triana or Granada's Sacromonte. Unlike several songs on the album, the item has very little flamenco character, aside from the *palmas* (hand-clapping) in certain passages; instead, the prevailing style is trap, and the visual presentation in general owes much to African American rap videos set in “ghetto” backdrops.

Various features mark Rosalía's persona in the song as a *choni* (working-class, “tacky”) Andalusian or Gitana girl of the *polígono*.³⁹ Her track-suit (*chándal*) attire and false nails and eyelashes are typical *choni*. In singing, she affects an Andalusian accent, eliding or aspirating final or preconsonantal *s* and omitting *d* between vowels.⁴⁰ Such pronunciation is standard and, indeed, obligatory in flamenco singing (including as sung by Catalans such as Mayte Martín) but would not typically be used by a non-Andalusian Spaniard either in speech or in song genres other than flamenco.⁴¹ Genre definitions are again relevant here; if “Malamente” were to be regarded as a flamenco song, then use of this Andalusian/Gitano accent would be appropriate, but since it is in fact more of a pop/trap song, the accent strikes some listeners as an affectation. Meanwhile, unmistakably Gypsy is Rosalía's mention at one point of Undebel, the Gitano *caló* word for God, and the mention of “Gitana” in the lyrics. Meanwhile, the female chorus at certain points interjects cries of “Quillo” (“keeyo,” or ‘illo), which, an abbreviation of *chiquillo*, is a mostly Andalusian slang, informal vocative (as might be used in a phrase like “Hey, kid!” or “Beat it, quillo!”). At another point, they exclaim “Trá, trá!” (from *atrás*) and “Toma que toma!” which are exclamations that might be shouted by flamenco dancers. Collectively, these elements constitute a sort of Andalusian, *choni*, and to some extent specifically Gypsy pose that Rosalía has adopted for this song and that has generated much controversy.

A few initial points should be made about this artistic impersonation of a lumpen Andalusian *choni* by Rosalía, a social outsider from a middle-class Catalan family. First, while the adoption of subaltern stereotypes suggests obvious affinities with American blackface minstrelsy, in contrast with that genre, it could be argued that the stereotypes presented in “Malamente” are not

necessarily negative (although some might regard them as such); rather, they are presented as somewhat cool and fashionable, albeit with a certain kitsch flavor. Accordingly, several self-identified Gitanos/as in YouTube comments claim to like Rosalía and this song.

Within Spanish cultural history there are various historical precedents for the kind of *gitanofilia* rearticulated in “Malamente.” One would be the centuries-old tradition (also cultivated in Latin America) of *costumbrismo*, meaning elite or middle-class interest in regional or minority folk cultures or, more precisely, in quaint and more or less exoticized versions of them. A particular variety of Spanish *costumbrismo* has been the historical fascination with Gitanos, which, especially from the early 1800s, led many Spaniards (chiefly young, urban men) to adopt flamboyant Gitano attire, slang, and swaggering demeanor. In the past, as today, Gitanos have been disparaged for various reasons, but many Spaniards have long seen them as alluring, exotic, charismatic, and “cool,” with their wild hair, colorful attire, and swarthy complexion, their values of freedom and individuality, and—not least—their extraordinary talent at music and dance (see, e.g., Steingress 1991:145).⁴² One relevant manifestation of the fascination for Gitanos was the nineteenth-century tradition of payos penning *gitanesca* (Gypsyesque) poetry in which the supposed Gypsy speaks of his love of sleeping under the stars or of his dark-eyed Gypsy woman, or he laments his persecution, all in Andalusian Spanish sprinkled with *caló* words (Steingress 1991:145–48). While the author of such verse could be said to be indulging in a sort of fictive “impersonation,” in many cases such verses were written explicitly for Gitanos themselves to sing.⁴³

A more overt sort of precedent is the tradition, especially in the nineteenth century, of non-Gitano dancers impersonating Gitanos onstage, whether in the form of non-Spaniards such as the Austrian ballerina Fanny Elssler (1810–84) or various Spanish dancers who would perform “Gypsy dances” in Europe in a phenomenon that Luis Lavour described as “gitanismo sin gitanas” (Gypsyism without Gypsies) ([1976] 1999:114–16; see also del Campo and Cáceres 2013:137). Several Spanish films of the midcentury decades also featured payo actors playing Gitano (and predominantly female) roles (for which see Peiró 2012). Such portrayals were typically sympathetic but more or less exoticizing and stereotypical. Often cited in arguments about Rosalía has been non-Gitana actress and flamenco-pop singer Lola Flores (1923–65), who became a veritable icon of Gypsy style and identity through her charisma and her longtime relationships and collaborations with prominent Gitano musicians. In some respects, the posturing in “Malamente” can also find close historical parallel in the ongoing adoption of African American music, from blues to rap, by white people. Is such borrowing to be seen as homage, innocent emulation, or a form of minstrelsy? (See Brown 2013; Aubert 2007; Goldberg 2019.) Meanwhile, a

more direct sort of precedent would be a pop song and video such as “Ojú” (2003), by Las Niñas, also portraying *polígono* Gitanas, but with the distinction that the featured singer and cofounder of the trio, Alba Molina, though not a ghetto dweller, is a Gitana from a prominent flamenco dynasty. (Molina is often mentioned by Rosalía critics as the sort of modern cantaora who merits more media attention than the Catalan diva.)

As of 2021, the status of Gitanos has of course changed in many ways from earlier centuries. Gitanos are no longer rounded up and sent as slaves to the galleons, as they were in the mid-1700s. While their traditional occupations as blacksmiths, basket weavers, and horse traders have evaporated, and Gitano communities continue to suffer from unemployment, illiteracy, and drug abuse, many Gitanos have assimilated into mainstream Spanish culture and moved into the middle class, in many cases while retaining the best of their traditional values, such as cultivation of flamenco, for which they are widely revered. While anti-Gitano bigotry persists (as voiced in several offensive YouTube comments), and ugly incidents of racist violence against Gitanos continue, overt discrimination against Gitanos is illegal and less common than in earlier centuries. Such progress may lead some to conclude that Spain has attained a felicitous, “postracial” state in which an artist such as Rosalía should feel free to adopt a Gitano persona without offending anyone, except for some hypersensitive activists animated by an excessive sense of political correctness and a cult of victimhood.⁴⁴ Such opinions are voiced explicitly on social media. At the same time, prevailing modern conceptions of human rights, multiculturalism, and respect have intensified sensitivity to offensive discourse, such that an impersonation like that undertaken by Rosalía could be seen as insulting minstrelsy, given the historical persecution of Gitanos, their ongoing disadvantaged status in Spanish society, and the persistence of bigotry and even violence against them. Anyone involved in the flamenco world (including myself) can attest, on the one hand, to the easy and amicable relations that often obtain between payos and Gitanos and, on the other hand, to the fractious tensions that can emerge in certain situations and that indicate that a benign, “postracial” state has yet to be achieved. In the following discussion I do not argue a position on the question of whether Rosalía’s impersonation in “Malamente” is inappropriate, which I regard as something for Spaniards themselves to settle.⁴⁵ Instead, my aim is to explore the contours of the controversy and what it tells us about flamenco culture and Spanish culture as a whole. Further, I do comment on some of the confusion that can be found in the various arguments. That is, while much of this discourse is subtle, one manifestation of the complexity of the issues involved is the considerable amount of incoherence that can pervade arguments. Typically, a partisan proclaims about “Malamente,” “This is cultural appropriation!” provoking a chorus of *rosalistas* (Rosalía fans) to shout, “Music is not owned by anyone!”

Flamenco is the universal patrimony of humanity! Artists should feel free to borrow what they like." Then the parties continue in this vein, shouting past each other, hurling red herrings about, and obscuring the actual issues, since, for one thing, it is not flamenco or any type of music that has been borrowed but an ethnic persona.

Such imprecision, far from being unique to Spain, has long infected discourse, both vernacular and scholarly, on minstrelsy and cultural exchange elsewhere. It could be said to derive from the inchoate sense that there is something unethical about elites imitating subalterns, coupled with the difficulty of conceptualizing sensible guidelines for cultural exchanges. Words such as "theft," "robbery," and "stealing"—loosely applied to cultural borrowings by everyone from Frederick Douglass to Eric Lott ([1993] 2013) and Steven Feld (1996:22)—can be misleading insofar as they imply that something belonging to the donor community has been depleted.⁴⁶ Little better is the word "appropriation," which is bandied about so carelessly and inconsistently—is it a negative term or a neutral one?—that it should arguably be retired from the English language entirely (perhaps like the hopelessly problematic term "cultural imperialism").⁴⁷ More useful for the present enquiry are the various scholars who have attempted to categorize, enumerate, and assess, with conceptual and terminological precision, the various dimensions and complexities involved in arguments about cultural exchange; particularly useful, for example, are Joel Rudinow's article subtitled "Can White People Sing the Blues?" (1994; see also Taylor 1995; Ziff and Rao 1997) and James Young's *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (2010; see also Young 2005). Young, for example, while clarifying that he uses the term "appropriation" in a neutral sense, productively distinguishes between "subject appropriation" (when an outsider represents members or aspects of another culture, as in fiction), "content appropriation" (using the cultural products of another culture), and "object appropriation" (taking a tangible object, such as a Benin bas-relief) and notes that such appropriation could be offensive or inoffensive and reasonable or unreasonable.⁴⁸

Emulating the clarity of these publications, we could commence by noting that the "cultural appropriation" in "Malamente" is a very specific kind of borrowing, in which a member of a dominant group impersonates and arguably exoticizes a subaltern in a commercial production in a society where bigotry against those subalterns remains common. The paradigmatic example of this practice is of course blackface minstrelsy, although I have not seen that analogy made in any Spanish discourse about Rosalía—perhaps partly because, as mentioned, her portrayal of the choni Gitana is not necessarily negative, unlike minstrelsy depictions of African Americans.⁴⁹ However, to all those (from Rosalía to postmodern cantaor Niño de Elche [see Niño de Elche 2018]) who indignantly proclaim, "Artists should feel free to borrow whatever they like!"

one might well ask if they approve of blackface minstrelsy, to which they would presumably have to mumble an acknowledgment, "OK, that kind of borrowing is not appropriate." Only at that point could a serious discussion of Rosalía's "Malamente" begin. Further, the rosalista defense that "flamenco is a universal art form" is not properly relevant to the song "Malamente," which, as mentioned, could not be considered flamenco even by the most inclusive definition of that genre.

Perhaps the most incisive and outspoken critic of Rosalía's posturing in "Malamente," Gitana activist Noelia Cortés, combines (in her series of tweets on the subject) her cultural-appropriation argument with claims that flamenco is a fundamentally and, to some extent, even exclusively Gitano art form in which payo singers are welcome only if they achieve certain (ambiguous) credentials.⁵⁰ Whether or not Cortés's linking of these two arguments is judicious, it has produced the unfortunate result that those who angrily respond to her tend to target this latter, vulnerable aspect of her criticism rather than the minstrelsy issue, and an observer (such as this author) might feel that little progress is made in resolving or even addressing core questions such as, Is Spain sufficiently "post-racial" that Rosalía's impersonation of a choni Gitana need not be offensive?

However, both Cortés in some passages and other Gitano spokespersons have well articulated the sense of resentment that "Malamente" has engendered among some (but by no means all) Gitanos. Cortés incisively writes:

Rosalía uses Gitanos as something cool to incorporate in her costume, though socially we [Gitanos] don't mean anything to her. . . . She picks some elements of other people's culture that have historically been used as resistance by these disadvantaged people and puts them on like fake eyelashes. From her racially and economically privileged background she can dress up in the style of marginality and the barrio without having had to suffer what people who live those things have suffered.

Similarly, Gitano scholar and advocate José Heredia asserts:

Rosalía neither understands nor knows how to use caló. Her imitation of Gitano symbols is an offensive mockery. She uses the word *undevel*, which means God in caló. It's a word that Gitanos have been persecuted for five hundred years for using. (quoted in Rosati 2018)

Other commenters clarify that offense could be taken not only by Gitanos but also by polígono dwellers and even Andalusians in general:

She uses the polígono style as kitsch. I can assure you that many of us who have been raised in these barrios don't think it's at all cute that a "nice" girl paints herself up for modern urbanites as if on a social safari.

Always making fun of Andalucía, our accent, our customs, our elders, and along comes this chick from outside and slaps together this jumble, has a hit, and you want to appropriate what is OURS.

The problem is that the girl is Catalan-speaking and doesn't come from a vernacular milieu [*entorno popular*]. And nowadays with the [Catalan] *independentistas* demanding to secede from Spain's poorer communities, along comes this chick dressing up as the very people the *independentistas* want to distance themselves from.⁵¹

In response to such criticisms, Rosalía's defenders offer a variety of arguments, some better taken than others. Particularly numerous and essentially digressive, as mentioned, are the retorts to the effect that "flamenco belongs to everyone!"⁵² Other ripostes diverge into arguments as to whether flamenco is a Gitano art form, an Andalusian one, or a patrimony of all humanity. This itself is a vast and ongoing debate, but again largely separate from an evaluation of "Malamente" as minstrelsy or "cultural appropriation." More relevant and tenable are the arguments that elements of culture, such as words and music, have always moved about and should continue to do so. In this view, voiced by various social-media commenters, those who denounce "cultural appropriation" are motivated by an archaic proprietary sense of culture and a fetish of political correctness imported from the United States. Wrote one journalist:

These people, whom I call the 'Cumbaya left,' couldn't care less about minorities but use any controversy to place themselves morally above everyone else. This little game of being offended [*ofendido*] is a fashion pose that doesn't oblige them to do anything, just post a few tweets. (Edu Galán, quoted in Terrasa 2018).

Hence, it is noted, Andalusians freely adopt English words and Catalanisms like *bona nit* (good night), Gitanos sing rap and reggaeton and play the Peruvian-derived *cajón*, and Gitanas have certainly borrowed rather than created the practice of wearing false eyelashes. To this, of course, some might counter that the acceptability of such borrowings can be negated by present and past power imbalances involved, as in the case of blackface. And lastly, mention must be made of the vast majority of Spaniards, including Rosalía fans, who are indifferent to the entire issue.

Conclusions and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

In this essay I have discussed what might seem to be a disparate set of controversies and questions. Should flamenco be defined in such an inclusive manner as to accommodate an innovative, hybrid production like *EMQ*, or should such works be relegated to a distinct category? Should the credentials of a singer—especially his or her ability to sing traditional flamenco—affect the legitimacy of that person's modernist innovations? Should the presence of an intangible expressiveness be regarded as necessary rather than merely desirable for an item to be considered flamenco? And lastly, is it ethically and aesthetically acceptable for a commercially successful social outsider of contested status as a *cantaora* to adopt the persona of an urban Gitana in a music video?

As mentioned, while many people would regard these issues—such as the definition of "flamenco"—to be profoundly inconsequential, to many ardent lovers of the art they are of tremendous importance, inspiring some partisans to post their opinions almost daily on social media. Moreover, I have attempted to argue that all these polemics are rooted in a basic sociohistorical tension inherent to flamenco culture involving the range of diverse social contexts in which flamenco has always been and still is performed. Attending these antipodal contexts are widely divergent degrees of sociomusical embedding. At one extreme is the domestic (quintessentially Gitano) celebration, the likes of which, though less common than in earlier generations, still occurs in towns such as Jerez and Utrera. Even if most students of flamenco (including many Gitanos) learn nowadays in classes rather than during family events, much of the appreciation and spirit of flamenco derives from an awareness, however idealized, of this historical milieu and the way it has always nourished the world of professional stage acts, which constitute the other end of the performance spectrum.

Ethnomusicologists have, of course, in innumerable publications documented how various genres, from highland New Guinean ritual songs to Albanian wedding songs, are intimately rooted in particular traditional social settings and could not be presented as autonomous art forms on a concert stage or in the mass media without considerable distortion, designification, and affective disembodiment. What is perhaps unusual about flamenco is that it has retained much of its embedded extramusical meaning—which affords it much expressive power for its enthusiasts—while also possessing the technical sophistication, expressive depth, and aesthetic "universality" to be cultivated, performed, and enjoyed as a relatively abstract, quasi-"classical" art form. As Leblon, quoted above, suggested, there is a delicate balance involved in this sociomusical configuration, which is perpetually challenged as flamenco confronts new audiences, new forms of media dissemination, and new aesthetic sensibilities. This sociomusical continuum also makes the Rosalía controversy considerably more than a tired, "tradition versus innovation" quarrel.

Rosalía managed to make these generally latent tensions explode into heated polemics through her popularity, her innovativeness, a perceived deficiency of expressive flair in some of her singing, and her status as a social outsider, which was only heightened by her problematic posturing as an insider in "Malamente." On one level, as this article has tried to suggest, what is important and interesting beyond the songstress herself is the somewhat unique and distinctive nature of flamenco and its culture. The intensity of the polemic aroused by the Rosalía phenomenon also illustrates how "universal" and socially embedded dimensions of an art form can at once coexist and conflict. Finally, it also reveals how, as ethnomusicologists have often noted, controversies about music can serve as contexts in which broader social issues and conflicts are rearticulated, negotiated, and in some cases even partially resolved.

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Notes

1. In this article, in accordance with contemporary norms, I use the now-controversial term "Gypsy" only when deliberately wishing to invoke some of the stereotypes it connotes; on other occasions, I use the term "Gitano" or "Roma."
2. Such notions, in the form of the now-discredited "hermetic" theory, were propounded by Gitano singer and writer Antonio Mairena (1909–83).
3. Flamenco's "universality" acquired a new dimension in 2010 when it was designated as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO, which provoked mixed reactions among those who felt that the award could be seen as minimizing the Andalusian and Gitano role in the art (see Aix Gracia 2014:373–81).
4. Coincidentally, this is sung by Rosalía in "Di mi nombre," from 1:00 and 1:57.
5. My cante teacher Alfonso Mogaburo Cid emphasized this sociohistorical point in teaching me this passage.
6. In this article I have opted not to cite YouTube comments, since postings are often ephemeral and pseudonymic.
7. A word about my approach to representing emic discourse may be appropriate here. I have discussed the Rosalía phenomenon with several of my flamenco-specialist friends (Spanish and non-Spanish), but I have found it expeditious to draw my quotations primarily from published interviews, journalistic articles, scholarly and "flamencology" books (recent and not recent), and the abundant public discourse on social media (with my compilation of comments from YouTube, Facebook, and assorted blogs totaling more than a hundred single-spaced pages).
8. All quotations in this article are originally in Spanish and are translated by the author, in some cases with the assistance of María Fernández Pello.
9. See, for example, Vergillos, who states, however hyperbolically, "In no other art is novelty so problematic" (1999:42).
10. This theme, in relation to flamenco, is explored in depth in Mitchell (1994:chap. 11).
11. For further discussion of genre classification in European and American popular music, see Holt (2007); Lena (2008, 2012); Brackett (2016); and Fabbri (1982). Useful general theoretical literature on genre would include Frow (2006, 2007).
12. Demófilo, in an oft-quoted 1881 passage, asserted that the hybrid genre of flamenco, as performed in the *café cantantes*, was causing the disappearance of "authentic and Gitano" song forms. As mentioned above, modern flamencologists doubt the existence of any such originary, unique Gitano entities and their supposed "hermetic" evolution in private Gitano milieus, however important these remained as performance contexts.
13. Similarly, an amateur fandango singer interviewed in the 1971 documentary *Rito y geografía* said, "When a man is given 500 *pesetas* for singing a fandango, the essence is lost. In the old days it was different . . . when people sang for the sake of it, with friends . . . but all that has been lost. That's why we get together here to sing real fandango" (10:20, <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=Ntzi83pKQ9M&t=9s>).
14. Peña Fernández (2013:27–46), while advancing a provocatively Gitanocentric view of flamenco, provides a vivid and compelling portrait of the presence of flamenco in the Gitano

- household in which he grew up, with frequent music and dance parties, womenfolk constantly singing flamenco as they do their chores, and children learning to sing and dance from early ages. (Yet another Gitano community context is the Pentecostal Iglesia de Filadelfia, whose services feature not dreary Protestant hymns but spirited flamenco tangos and rumbas.)
15. In a similar vein, see "Editors" 2000.
 16. Those familiar with Gitano reunions, such as my cante teacher Alfonso Cid, have noted that the revelers often sing and dance to contemporary pop songs (e.g., by Niña Pastori), as well as "pure" flamenco tangos and bulerías items.
 17. As one YouTube commentator wrote, "The guitarist is an insult *por dios*. . . [T]o bludgeon [aporrar] the instrument this way and call it flamenco is a disgrace." Flamenco singer Alfonso Cid (personal communication with the author, May 2020) disagrees, preferring to hear Refree's playing as perfectly adequate in an "indie-rock" vein. See Kendall Walton's classic—though not uncontroversial—1970 article "Categories of Art," which argued that one can only assess the aesthetic properties and value of a work of art once one has determined the category to which it belongs.
 18. The *siguiriyas* is of Gitano singer Antonio Cagancho, recorded earlier variously by Manuel Vallejo and Tomás Pavón. The string ensemble accompaniment, although innovative, closely resembles that used in Camarón 1970s and 1980s recordings of "Dicen de mí" and "Nana del caballo grande."
 19. For example, *sacáis* and *duca* (pain), cognate with, for example, Hindi *dukh*.
 20. The melody is associated with Gitana singer La Repompa de Málaga. For its part, the opening shot of the video invokes the famous painting *La Maja* by Goya.
 21. In "Breaking the Rules of Flamenco: Rosalía and Raúl Refree Catalina by Folch," <https://www.folchstudio.com/rosalia-raul-refree/>.
 22. Indeed, it is difficult to refer to her in Spanish without using either one of these two words, whose choice immediately proclaims one's position in the debate.
 23. "Perfil de Rosalía: Rosalía, viaje del flamenco al 'trap'" (Portrait of Rosalía: A trip from flamenco to trap), interview with Virginia López Enano, *El País*, November 1, 2018, https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/09/06/eps/1536246627_030346.html.
 24. Facebook comment by flamencologist José Luis Ortiz Nuevo, who has been one of Rosalía's most outspoken supporters.
 25. "Crítica a Rosalía—cómo sonar flamenco," <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=AtvrNjfyhZo>. Wrote one uncharitable YouTube commenter: "Her fast vibrato sounds like a toilet in an emergency." A detailed and rigorous examination of flamenco voice production is presented in Márquez Limón (2017).
 26. <https://www.elmundotoday.com/2018/11/rosalia-la-catalana-que-invento-el-flamenco/>.
 27. Gitana activist Noelia Cortés, discussed below.
 28. For an expansive discussion of regionalism in flamenco, see Machin-Autenrieth (2016).
 29. This sort of criticism has also been directed at postmodern quasi-flamenco performance artist Niño de Elche (Francisco Contreras Molina), who describes himself as an "ex-flamenco singer." The typical criticism is, "In order to be an ex-flamenco singer, first you have to be a flamenco singer." See, for example, García Reyes (2018a).
 30. Could jazz innovator Ornette Coleman solo competently over a standard like "Stella by Starlight"? (Questionable.) Could Jackson Pollock "actually draw"? (Yes.) Does it matter?
 31. The video was removed in 2020.
 32. "Rosalía improvisa en el Tablao Flamenco Cordobes de Barcelona." In 2020 comments were eliminated and disabled. https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=5W-_NEGq2R4.
 33. Readers unfamiliar with flamenco aesthetics might readily contrast the latter video with another informal bulerías, at the same session, featuring cantaora La Fabi, who sings with all the flair, exuberance, and spontaneity of someone who, as is the case, has been singing in family reunions since childhood and performing professionally since early adolescence. "La cantaora 'La Fabi' en Tablao Flamenco Cordobes de Barcelona," <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=6GidyXoUxos>.

34. Said one, "She has less compás than a leaky faucet." In jazz discourse, the comparable criticism would be, "She doesn't swing."

35. These considerations apply more to singing than to flamenco guitar, which is widely understood as an idiom that can be learned as an abstract art form in any country or social milieu.

36. The same criticisms ("Don't sing flamenco if you can't do it!") were leveled at pop singer and actor Nya de la Rubia when, in a YouTube video, she sang a few phrases in flamenco style. Issues of "credentials" and background were again raised, as one commenter insisted that she has a right to sing it, however hesitantly, by virtue of being a Gitana from Triana (Seville's former Gitano quarter, now gentrified). Ironically, despite her dark complexion and her role as a Gitana in the Netflix series *Mar de plástico*, she is not a Gitana and has never pretended to be. See "Nya de la Rubia con su tema Callejuelos en Dreamland," <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=DfGPzfFsbj8&t=55s>.

37. Among the many newspaper and online articles about Rosalía and "cultural appropriation" are Cervera (2018); Maldonado (2018); Rosati (2018); Mohorte (2018); Guillén (2018); Beatley (2018); and Terrasa (2018).

38. The seminal study of the complexities and ambivalences in blackface is Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* (1993). The complexities in flamenco evolution, as explored, for example, in Steingress (1991) and Lavour ([1976] 1999), include the way that Gitano performers historically exoticized themselves in response to Romantic and touristic demands.

39. *Choni* (n., adj., the female counterpart of *cani*) denotes a loud, poorly educated, lower-class young woman with outlandish, "tacky" (*cutre*) jewelry, hairdo, and nails who is typically fond of reggaeton. Alfonso Cid (p.c.) notes that "choni" is a slang term primarily of Madrid rather than Andalusia, though it is the word most often used in discussions of Rosalía's persona here. He also points out that the track-suit is common attire among sports-loving Catalonians, even if Rosalía here is clearly wearing a sort of chic form of prole polígono attire.

40. For example, in this accent, which is shared by Caribbean Hispanics, *estados* becomes *ehatah* or simply *etao*.

41. Thus, for example, one cante teacher of mine (Ismael Fernández, a Gitano from Seville) explicitly coached me and my fellow students in the appropriate thick Andalusian/Gitano rendering of such phrases as *mal de amores*, properly sung as *mar d'amore*.

42. For studies of comparable phenomena relating to Eastern European Roma, see, for example, Beissinger (2001); Silverman (2012); Markovic (2012); Tebbutt and Tebbutt (2004); and Szeman (2009). Particularly relevant is the latter's discussion of the exoticizing productions of Romanian, non-Romani "Gypsy" bands and deejays, whose most typical form "maintains Gypsy stereotypes and erases Romani musicians' contribution, adding yet another step in the process of appropriation, projection, and erasure of the Roma in 'Gypsy music' performances" (Szeman 2009:114).

43. A prominent modern example would be the several songs written by Antonio Sánchez (father of guitarist Paco de Lucía) for Camarón de la Isla. The practice of payos writing song lyrics for Gitano performers is portrayed in fiction in Cervantes's short story "La Gitanilla" (1613) and presumably dates at least as far back.

44. It is customary in Spanish discourse to refer to Gitanos as a distinct race rather than an ethnic group, especially in accordance with traditional Spanish concerns with *casta* (caste) and blood purity. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), while rejecting the notion of biologically distinct races, recognizes the concept of racism involving people perceived, however erroneously, as racially distinct.

45. Should any reader be curious, I offer the humble "outsider's" opinion that Rosalía's posing in "Malamente" is somewhat injudicious and not reflective of the artistic sensitivity and intelligence that distinguish the rest of her album and that she should have considered the offense that would be taken by some politically aware Gitanos.

46. Douglass in 1848 commented that blackface performers "have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature."

47. Particularly common and arguably dishonest is the use of the term in a way that welcomes its negative connotations without making explicit argument in support of them. In ethnomusicological literature, examples of this can be found in Feld (1996:6, 7, 9, 18). Another instance, in a different medium, is the YouTube video by actor Amandla Stenberg, "Don't Cash Crop on My Cornrows" (currently with about 2.5 million views), which criticizes (or seems to criticize?) as "cultural appropriation"—again using innuendo rather than explicit argument—the practice of white girls wearing their hair in corn rows. The roughly twelve thousand comments on this video constitute in their way a rich debate about "cultural appropriation."

48. A derogatory appropriation could be both "offensive" and "reasonable," as in, for example, a comedian's adoption of a Ku Klux Klansman's persona in order to mock and deliberately offend that person and his community. None of these authors, however, discusses the particular kind of appropriation involved in minstrelsy, although it is related to other forms of "subject appropriation."

49. Spain hosts its own minor blackface tradition in the town of Alcoy, where, in Christmas season, several hundred teenagers are painted in blackface, with whimsically garish red lips, as they parade and distribute gifts, imitating Baltasar, the allegedly black—and traditionally most popular—member of the Three Wise Men. The custom has generated some controversy in recent decades, and local spokespersons have been obliged to defend it as innocent.

50. Cortés's tweets can be found at <https://twitter.com/thelazaruslady/status/946018946897055744?lang=en>.

51. "Venga esta chica disfrazándose de la gente que los independentistas tachan de cuñados," literally, "Along comes this chick disguising herself as the very people that the *independentistas* brand as brothers-in-law," that is, as in-laws (Spaniards) with whom one is forced to coexist whether one likes them or not.

52. Although Rosalía herself is generally well spoken and respectful of Gitano flamencos, she evaded the issue in this same fashion when questioned directly about the impersonation in "Malamente": "Flamenco doesn't belong to Gitanos, or anyone. . . I grew up near industrial polígonos, I have a connection to that life" (in Díaz-Guerra 2018). And "this 'cultural appropriation' business—everything is already completely mixed, in the internet, in cities. . . Am I appropriating from flamenco? No, I see it very clearly" (in Alemán 2017).

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