https://doi.org/10.12797/RM.02.2024.16.07 Licencing information: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Jadwiga Romanowska[1]

FLAMENCO DANCE ACADEMIES IN SEVILLE – A TRANSCULTURAL EXCHANGE FIELD

Abstract

The objective of this text is to present flamenco dance academies in Seville as a field of transcultural exchange. The theoretical framework is provided by two concepts: Wolfgang Welsch's idea of transculturality and Francisco Aix Gracia's concept of the 'flamenco field' (campo flamenco). Flamenco dance academies serve functions that extend well beyond the mere execution of dance instructions – they are institutions where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, including foreigners, Andalusians, Andalusian Roma, and Spaniards from outside Andalusia, interact and negotiate their cultural identity. Flamenco dance schools also may be considered as transcultural platforms for the renegotiation of elements integral to the identities of foreign dancers, including lifestyle, behaviour, language, body, movement, and expression.

Keywords: flamenco, dance, dance academy, transculturality

This text presents some of the findings from research conducted in Seville within the foreign flamenco dance community between 2013 and 2016.[2] Flamenco is often seen as a cultural expression tied to a specific region – Andalusia – and certain groups, such as Andalusians and Andalusian Roma. Within the flamenco community, concepts like purity (*pureza*) and authenticity are highly valued. At the same time, flamenco's inclusion on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List highlights its universal appeal. This global recognition draws hundreds of foreign students to Andalusia each

[1] Institute of Intercultural Studies, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland; ORCID 0000-0002-7588-2373; jadwiga.romanowska@uj.edu.pl.

[2] This article stems from the need to disseminate the findings of research conducted in Seville as part of my doctoral thesis. The extended conclusions have been published in Romanowska 2023.

year to learn flamenco in its place of origin. As a result, Seville's flamenco academies have become spaces for transcultural exchange, where foreigners, Andalusians, Andalusian Roma, and Spaniards from outside Andalusia interact. This text aims to provide an ethnographic overview of flamenco dance schools in Seville, exploring how these institutions serve as sites of ongoing transcultural exchange, with a particular focus on foreign flamenco dancers.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed two primary methods: in-depth interviewing[3] and participant observation. In this text, the focus is primarily on the results of participant observation. Participant observation involves establishing close contact between the researcher and the host community, requiring long-term immersion in the daily life of the group being studied (Angrosino 2009). During my fieldwork between 2013 and 2016, I conducted three separate periods of participant observation, each lasting several months. This allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the inner workings of flamenco dance schools in Seville and collect valuable information about the international students attending these schools.

The participant observation primarily took place at the Escuela de Flamenco Ados Ángel Atienza.[4] However, I also had the opportunity to interact with students and teachers at several other flamenco academies in Seville, where I met people who were taking lessons, including:

- Academia de Flamenco Manuel Betanzos,
- Andrés Marín Estudio de Baile Flamenco Abierto,
- Escuela de Baile Alicia Márquez,
- Escuela Flamenca Juan Polvillo,
- Estudio Flamenco De Los Reyes,

[3] Due to space constraints, this text does not delve into the in-depth interviews conducted during the study. However, it is worth emphasising the multicultural composition of the research group, which included 63 respondents from 23 countries: Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, the Czech Republic, England, Finland, France, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Germany, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Syria, Taiwan, and the USA.

[4] Currently, the school is known as *Escuela de Flamenco Ángel Atienza*.

- Flamenco Danza Estudio (Úrsula López, Tamara López),
- Fundación Cristina Heeren de Arte Flamenco,
- Los Corralones de Castellar.

TRANSCULTURALITY AND THE TRANSCULTURAL FIELD OF EXCHANGE

This research draws on two main theoretical concepts: Wolfgang Welsch's (1998, 1999, 2004) idea of transculturality and Francisco Aix Gracia's (2014) concept of the "flamenco field" (*campo flamenco*).

Welsch describes transculturality as a result of the diversity and complexity inherent in modern cultures, which function like interconnected networks. He argues that individuals within these networks are hybrids, and their transcultural identities naturally reflect the cosmopolitan spaces they inhabit. Importantly, transcultural identities combine both global and local elements, highlighting how local affiliations remain significant in identity construction.

Afef Benessaieh (2010) expands on this, framing transculturality as a way to understand the dynamic cultural changes happening in increasingly globalised societies. By viewing cultures as interactive networks of relationships and meanings, transculturality captures the fluid and multilayered nature of cultural exchanges. It offers a way to describe the lived experiences of individuals and communities whose identities reflect complex blends of cultural influences, especially in the context of globalisation.

The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's (2002) concept of transculturation provides additional depth. Though developed in a colonial context, Ortiz's theory describes cultural exchange as an ongoing process involving unequal power dynamics. In *Contrapunteo cubano de tabaco y el azúcar*, Ortiz analyses cultural interactions in Cuba, where colonisers and subjugated populations – including indigenous groups and immigrants – created new cultural forms through exchanges marked by dominance and subordination.

Francisco Aix Gracia's term "flamenco field" (*campo flamenco*) focuses on the symbolic struggles within flamenco culture, particularly between traditionalism (*tradicionalismo*) and openness (*aperturismo*). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theories, Aix Gracia highlights debates over what defines flamenco. Traditionalists associate flamenco with specific groups

(Andalusians and Andalusian Roma) and view it as something inherited rather than learned (*con el arte se nace*). By contrast, proponents of openness advocate for innovation and fusion within flamenco, though traditionalists often dismiss such efforts as commercially motivated.

Aix Gracia also examines power dynamics within the flamenco community, distinguishing between established artists (*consagrad*s* – "sanctified") and newcomers (*aspirantes*). The latter group often struggles to gain recognition and access the economic, social, and symbolic capital available to established performers. Non-Spanish flamenco dancers attempting to achieve professional status frequently occupy even lower positions within this hierarchy, highlighting additional layers of subordination.

In this study, the concept of the "flamenco field" is adapted to include transcultural dimensions. A "transcultural field of exchange" refers to a space where ongoing, multidirectional cultural exchanges occur within a framework of power relations and subordination. These exchanges, often unconscious or unintentional, reshape the cultural space based on specific contexts and interactions. The structure of these exchanges resembles a network, emphasising fluid and dynamic relationships. Julie-Anne Boudreau's (2010) idea of "transcultural moments" also applies here. These fleeting experiences of cultural contact contribute to identity formation over time, demonstrating how transcultural exchanges shape individuals and communities in subtle but lasting ways.

FLAMENCO IMMERSED IN TRANSCULTURAL PROCESSES[5]

Flamenco is a cultural phenomenon that has been shaped by a multitude of influences from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a fully formed genre, it emerged in the second half of the 19th century among the Andalusian bohemian community (Steingress 2007). The basic manifestations of flamenco are music (*cante* – singing, *toque* – guitar playing) and dance (*baile*). However, within the flamenco community, it is perceived that flamenco represents more than merely an artistic message. In this context, it is frequently described as a style of life or a philosophy of life.

[5] It is noteworthy that the term "transculturation" has also gained currency among Spanish-speaking scholars of flamenco (Lorente Rivas & González Alcantud 2004; Steingress 2006; Steingress 2007).

From the very beginning, flamenco's history has been influenced by foreigners. In the 19th century, romantic travellers, captivated by Romani culture, played a key role in creating the enduring myth of Romani flamenco. An intriguing example from this period is the phenomenon of the *gitanas fingidas* – foreign dancers who pretended to be of Romani origin (Steingress 2006).

Scholars have identified two main phases in flamenco's global engagement. During the first phase, from the late 19th century to the 1970s, flamenco was experienced passively outside Spain. It was introduced to international audiences through touring groups of Spanish artists. In this period, flamenco often became detached from its original cultural context, gaining popularity in countries such as the USA, France, Japan, and Germany.

The second phase began in the 1970s with the establishment of flamenco schools outside Spain. This marked a shift from passive reception to active participation. Increasing numbers of flamenco enthusiasts started visiting Spain, particularly Andalusia, to experience this art form in its place of origin. This development highlights the evolving role of flamenco in transcultural processes, as it continues to navigate its complex relationship with both local traditions and global audiences.

FOREIGNERS IN A FLAMENCO TRANSCULTURAL EXCHANGE FIELD

Approximately 700,000 tourists, both Spanish and international, visit Andalusia to experience flamenco (El Economista 2016). While most engage passively, a significant number of foreigners come to actively participate, either as hobbyists or amateurs. According to the 2004 report – *La Demanda de Turismo de Flamenco en Andalucía*, 75.1% of tourists attending flamenco schools in Andalusia are foreigners, with Japanese visitors leading the group (19.1%), followed by the French (11.6%) and Germans (9.1%). The figures given are for flamenco schools that do not distinguish between music and dance, but it is dance that attracts the most students to Andalusia. The cultural diversity of flamenco dance schools is perfectly illustrated by Escuela de Flamenco Ángel Atienza – the school where I conducted the participant observatory. From 2006 to 2013, the institution welcomed students from 107 countries, with a total of several thousand individuals pursuing their studies there.

By examining the community of foreign flamenco adepts in relation to the general category of the transcultural field of exchange, a characteristic space can be distinguished. The term “flamenco space” is understood both literally and metaphorically. In its literal sense, “flamenco space” denotes all locations where flamenco can be observed. In addition, the following locations will be included: dance schools, which are of particular relevance to this study; venues where flamenco can be observed and heard, such as peñas, tablaos, theatres, bars, restaurants, cafés, and other public spaces where the flamenco community may gather informally. In this context, the term “space” is used in its conventional sense to encompass all forms of events dedicated to flamenco, including but not limited to shows, concerts, biennales, festivals, lessons, lectures, and so forth. In addition, I am referring to the sphere of life beyond flamenco, which encompasses all kinds of social gatherings (meals, birthdays, religious and public holidays, holiday trips, etc.), in which flamenco is no longer the primary focus.[6] This analysis will focus on flamenco dance schools as a case study of transcultural spaces. These schools serve as dynamic sites where multidirectional cultural exchanges unfold, offering insights into how flamenco connects individuals from diverse backgrounds in a shared cultural practice.

FLAMENCO SCHOOLS IN SEVILLE – TRANSCULTURAL SPACES

Flamenco Schools – Basic Information

It is important to note that flamenco schools in Seville cater to two distinct groups of flamenco enthusiasts: on the one hand, tourists and hobbyists: These individuals visit Andalusia for a brief period and are drawn to the authenticity of flamenco lessons, though without professional aspirations. A separate offer is aimed at those flamenco students whose ambition is to become professional artists. These individuals typically choose to remain in Seville for a long period of time in order to acquire the necessary skills

[6] In any discussion of the literal and metaphorical spaces of flamenco, the role of virtual space cannot be overlooked. During my interviews, respondents highlighted social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as crucial tools for building personal and professional connections, promoting performances, and accessing information. However, a comprehensive exploration of this topic would require a dedicated study.

to deal with flamenco professionally, either in Spain or in other countries. This group includes dancers (*bailaores/as*), guitarists (*tocaores/as or guitarristas*) and singers (*cantaores/as*).

The flamenco school community in Seville is highly diverse. It is possible to distinguish at least three groups among the students.

1. Leisure Learners: These individuals, whether foreign or local, view flamenco as a recreational activity.
2. Foreign Professionals in Training: They temporarily reside in Seville but ultimately aim to establish careers in their home countries.
3. Professionals Seeking Spanish Careers: These individuals, both foreign and local, aspire to compete in the Spanish flamenco scene and often settle in Seville long-term or permanently.

It is important to note that the boundaries between these categories are fluid. It is not uncommon for casual learners to develop a deeper passion for flamenco and eventually commit to longer stays in Seville. This phenomenon is observed among both foreign and Spanish nationals.

The flamenco schools in Seville represent a dynamic cultural exchange environment. Students from across the globe come together to enhance their knowledge of flamenco while forming new social connections with peers who share their passion. The academies serve as a repository of knowledge regarding flamenco culture, performances, concerts, and festivals. By spending a few hours each day in these establishments, students engage in a process of self-redefinition in contact with others, which is both conscious and involuntary. Such establishments also serve as a conduit for direct engagement with the indigenous creators and *aficionados* – admirers of flamenco culture. It is a space where disparate worldviews and cultures converge, necessitating the development of a shared understanding to facilitate collaboration towards a common objective: the attainment of optimal results in dance.

Modus operandi of Flamenco Dance Schools in Seville

Flamenco dance schools in Seville share many similarities in how they operate, offering a variety of classes focused on both technique and choreography. Very often, the morning classes are led by the proprietors of the dance schools themselves. The afternoon classes are typically taught by external instructors invited to provide their expertise. Similarly, these instructors also vary on a monthly basis, as they are not exclusively associated

with a single institution but rather with multiple ones concurrently. Live music accompanies choreography classes two to three times a week, with a singer participating at least once weekly, giving students the opportunity to practice dancing to live music.

In order to facilitate the learning process for those new to dance, the choreography taught in the less advanced groups is typically integrated with music, including singing and guitar. However, as flamenco is an improvisation-based dance performed to live music, it is uncommon for the choreography to be set to a definitive, closed structure. From the outset, dancers are instructed that musicians may be mistaken, and thus they must be prepared to navigate even the most challenging circumstances. Consequently, more advanced students are exposed to a variety of rhythmic and melodic elements, which they must navigate without compromising their dance and stage expression. This approach enables the instructor to ascertain the extent to which the dancer adheres to the choreographic structure without fully engaging with the musical elements of the performance. Flamenco is always about a dialogue between the dancer and the musicians, rather than merely executing a learned choreography.

In regard to lessons that are primarily focused on the technical aspects of the dance, a typical structure would be as follows: the initial 30 minutes would be dedicated to technical exercises pertaining to a specific element, followed by another 30 minutes of practice in which that element is incorporated into increasingly complex variations. Similarly, separate classes are often held on the technique of turns, following a comparable structure.

It is also important to note that all lessons are conducted in Spanish, and that teachers frequently utilise specialised flamenco terminology. It is therefore incumbent upon foreigners to learn Spanish, and more specifically, Andalusian flamenco jargon. While some instructors may be proficient in English, it is generally discouraged for students to rely on this language exclusively, particularly given the importance of Spanish in the field of flamenco.

Transcultural Exchange Between the Cloakroom and the Training Room

When discussing dance schools as a place for cultural exchange, it is important to note that the changing cloakroom plays a special role in the transcultural exchange that occurs in flamenco schools, providing a space for informal interaction and emotional expression. It is there that the

dancers can talk freely, as the discipline of the classes does not allow this during the lessons. There is also almost no time for talking during breaks, as they are very short. The time in the cloakroom, on the other hand, is when the male and female dancers can make their first friends (changing rooms are usually not mixed-gender). Networking is normally easy, as Andalusian culture "imposes" a great deal of openness in superficial contacts. This openness manifests itself in the words of greeting and farewell and the obligatory complaining about the weather – whether the sun is shining or it is raining, in Seville's changing rooms the day almost always begins with a criticism of the prevailing weather conditions – a kind of "changing room" ritual. In the early stages, the dancers (especially Asian dancers) keep a lot of polite distance. The situation is different when there are large groups of flamenco dancers from individual countries in the classes – then they tend to focus only on their fellow countrywomen. Generally, however, after a while the dancers open up to each other. It is worth noting that the locals and students who have been in Seville for a long period of time do not interact too readily with new flamenco dancers. These most intense relationships occur between dancers arriving at the school for a short time. In the changing room there is a place for exchange of contacts (phone numbers, WhatsApps etc.).

As their time in Seville lengthens, the dancers begin to behave differently in the changing room. Of course, they feel much more confident there, but they also lose their initial desire to get to know "all" the new people appearing at the school, beginning to strengthen their bonds with those who stay longer in Seville. They also try to interact more intensively with Sevillians. The higher the level of the classes and the longer the dancers stay in Seville, the less the conversation focuses on cultural exchanges and more on strictly dance topics, related to performances, the choice of musicians or the difficulties of choreographing or simply on everyday matters.

Another interesting issue related to the reality of changing rooms is the sense of shame caused by nudity. Although the dressing rooms are frequented by dancers who, by definition, should be familiar with their physicality, they react very differently to the negligee that appears in the changing rooms. There are dancers who have no problem with showing and seeing their naked bodies, but there are also dancers who find such situations very embarrassing. Dancers who remain only at beginner level rarely go beyond the barriers that are restricted by their shame. Usually,

as time passes and the dancers become more involved in the art of dance, their approach to their own and others' corporeality changes.

Noteworthy each of the teachers has his/her own way of dancing and teaching. Some remain "bodily aloof" from the students and never touch them. Dancers learn from them, mainly by observation, how their bodies work. A much larger group are the teachers who come into physical contact with the students. Through touch, they correct their figures, point out and correct mistakes. Some are careful with this, others are very direct. Not all pupils are used to this form of body work. They feel uncomfortable with it. This is confirmed by statements from some Asian women "complaining" about the very bold form of touch from some teachers. The Japanese women I spoke to found it difficult to accept crossing bodily boundaries – touching their buttocks and hugging them. After a while, however, they became accustomed to this form of teaching. Some teachers also tend to be very strict in their assessment of pupils' progress. They criticise them severely during class in front of the whole group. Sometimes it leads pupils to cry and leave the lesson.

In summary, the cloakroom complements the training room as an integral part of the flamenco school experience. It provides a vital space for cultural exchange, emotional processing, and negotiation of boundaries, reflecting the multifaceted nature of these transcultural hubs.

CONCLUSIONS

This article aimed to demonstrate how flamenco dance schools in Seville operate as transcultural spaces of exchange. Foreigners aspiring to become professional flamenco dancers bring with them diverse cultural influences. Their "identity baggage" is shaped both by their national identities – sometimes in tension with their new environment – and by their individual life experiences. Dance schools are where these individuals encounter their first "transcultural moments," interacting with dancers from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including Andalusia and other regions of Spain. Every such moment enhances their transcultural competencies, enabling them to adapt more effectively to their new reality.

While seemingly trivial, the role of the school changing room in this context is far from insignificant. This space serves multiple functions within the framework of cultural exchange. As students prepare for their lessons,

they also share information about flamenco events and happenings in Seville. It is in the changing room that many foreigners forge their first social connections and begin constructing narratives about their experiences. Here, students from across the globe exchange cultural perspectives, fostering mutual understanding and forming initial bonds. Moreover, the changing room provides a space for emotional release and recovery after physically demanding training sessions.

Trivial as it may sound, while discussing the issue of flamenco dance schools it is worth noting the non-obvious space of the school changing room, which serves a number of functions in the context of cultural exchange. While dressing up, the participants also learn about flamenco events and events related to the life of the city – Seville. It is within the context of the dressing room that foreigners establish their initial social connections and construct a narrative about themselves. In the changing rooms, students from a multitude of global origins engage in the exchange of their respective cultural backgrounds, thereby facilitating the acquisition of insights from the cultural experiences of others. Additionally, the initial alliances between students are established in this intimate setting. Changing rooms serve as a venue for flamenco students to recuperate after strenuous training and to express their emotions, which may not always be positive.

In contrast, the classroom is where the body becomes a focal point of negotiation – both in terms of movement and expression. Teachers aim to instill a specific "flamenco aesthetic," but not all students are immediately ready to embrace the unique expressiveness of flamenco. The process of "embodiment" in flamenco demands time, patience, and a willingness to reevaluate deeply ingrained patterns of movement. Asymmetric power dynamics between seasoned flamenco artists and aspiring students are particularly evident within the dance practice rooms, where cultural capital is cultivated and challenged.

In summary, flamenco schools in Seville fulfil functions far beyond the instruction of dance. They act as transcultural forums for renegotiating elements central to the identities of foreign dancers, including lifestyle, behaviour, language, body, movement, and expression. While this article does not offer an exhaustive exploration of the topic, it provides a foundation for further, more detailed studies. The space of Seville's flamenco dance academies illustrates the complexity of contemporary inter- and transcultural interactions. As Wolfgang Welsch suggests, these relationships are embedded in intricate, multidimensional networks of connection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aix Gracia, F. 2014. *Flamenco y poder. Un estudio desde la sociología del arte*, Madrid: Fundación SGAE.

Angrosino, M. V. 2009. Obserwacja w nowym kontekście. Etnografia, pedagogika i rozwój problematyki społecznej. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln (eds), *Metody badań jakościowych*, vol. 2, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 129–152.

Benessaieh, A. 2010. Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality. In A. Benessaieh (ed.), *Amériques transculturelles – Transcultural Americas*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 11–38, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ch78hd.4.

Boudreau, J.-A. 2010. Moving Through Space and Being Moved Emotionally: Embodied Experience of Transculture. In A. Benessaieh (ed.), *Amériques transculturelles – Transcultural Americas*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 69–89, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ch78hd.6.

Cruces Roldán, C. 2002. *Más allá de la música. Antropología y flamenco*, vol. 1: *Sociabilidad, transmisión y patrimonio*, Sevilla: Signatura Ediciones.

Cruces-Roldán, C. 2017. Flamenco post-UNESCO. Acciones, nuestrifi cación y paradojas, entre lo popular y lo comercial. Paper (recording) presented at the conference Canciones de Ida y Vuelta, Lisbon, 6–7.10.2017. https://www.facebook.com/InstitutoAndaluzFlamenco/?fref=ts – 7 X 2017.

El Economista. 2016. September 27. El flamenco se reivindica como industria y como marca de Andalucía, *El Economista*. https://www.eleconomista.es/andalucia/noticias/7851677/09/16/El-flamenco-se-reivindica-como-industria-y-como-marca-de-Andalucia.html – 26 XI 2024.

Junta de Andalucía. 2004. Report: La demanda de Turismo de Flamenco en Andalucía 2004. https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/export/drupaljda/133716329419631.pdf – 17 XI 2024.

Lorente Rivas, M., & González Alcantud, J. A. 2004. Transculturaciones flamencas. Varia inflexiva, *Revista Transcultural de Música*, 8, 1–14. https://www.sibetrans.com/trans/articulo/197/transculturaciones-fl – 26 XI 2024.

Nagy-Zekmi, S. 2001. Angel Rama y su ensayística transcultural(izadora) como autobiografía en clave crítica, *Revista Chilena de Literatura*, 58, 123–132.

Ortiz, F. 2002. *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, Madrid: Catedra.

Romanowska, J. 2021. Obcokrajowcy w kulturze flamenco. Problem negocjacji tożsamości, *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture: New Series*, 13(1), 133–152, https://doi.org/10.4467/24506249PJ.21.007.13734.

Romanowska, J. 2023. *Transkulturujący, transkulturowani. Obcokrajowcy w sewilskiej społeczności flamenco*, Warszawa: Aspra.

Spitta, S. 1995. *Between Two Waters: Narratives of Transculturation in Latin America*, Houston: Rice University Press.

Steingress, G. 2006. *…Y Carmen se fue a París. Un estudio sobre la construcción artística del género flamenco (1833–1865)*, Cordoba: Almuzara.

Steingress, G. 2007. *Flamenco Postmoderno: Entre tradición y heterodoxia. Un diagnóstico sociomusicológico (Escritos 1989–2006)*, Sevilla: Signatura Ediciones.

Welsch, W. 1998. Transkulturowość. Nowa koncepcja kultury (B. Susła, J. Wietecki, transl.). In R. Kubicki (ed.), *Filozoficzne konteksty rozumu transwersalnego. Wokół koncepcji Wolfganga Welscha*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Fundacji Humaniora, 195–222.

Welsch, W. 1999. Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash (eds), *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, London: Sage Publications, 194–213, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218723.n11.

Welsch, W. 2004. Tożsamość w epoce globalizacji. Perspektywa transkulturowa (K. Wilkoszewska, transl.). In K. Wilkoszewska (ed.), *Estetyka transkulturowa*, Krakow: Universitas, 31–59.