

THE *PETENERA* AND THE FLAMENCO TIME MACHINE: A LENS INTO THE INVISIBLE IMMIGRANTS OF HAWAII'S SUGAR PLANTATIONS

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Abstract

The *petenera* is part of the most *jondo* of flamenco and it offers a lens into the ways the history of Al-Andalus's 800 years of tolerance and the violence of the Inquisition are always swirling around us.

Discovering the recording of a *petenera* recorded by my great-aunt and uncle has allowed for me a lens into their history, the history of my family, and the invisible immigrants who emigrated not so legally via Hawaii's sugar plantations.

In 1912, my great-aunt and uncle were among the "human freight" that came from Andalusia to work on the Hawaiian sugar plantations. My Uncle Jose was a migrant worker. He was never a professional flamenco singer. Singing flamenco helped him find peace and cope with what we know now was PTSD but then was called "schizophrenia."

My aunt and my uncle recorded a *petenera* shortly after they became American citizens. In 1924 the United States started an immigration quota on Spain, declared it a "shithole country" that was sending over only anarchists and deviants. In 1953 the Rosenbergs were executed and the United States made a deal with Franco to have a naval base at Ronda. I do not know which of these events most influenced the recording of this song, or my Aunt and Uncle finally being able to become citizens.

Looking at this history offers a warning and an encouragement: We need more cultural pluralism instead of cultural puritanism, and we need more empathy- especially when it comes to immigration, and trying to imagine a world *sin fronteras*.

Keywords:

Flamenco, *petenera*, immigration.

Resumen

La petenera es parte de lo más jondo del flamenco y ofrece una lente a las formas en que la historia de los 800 años de tolerancia de Al-Andalus y la violencia de la Inquisición están siempre girando a nuestro alrededor.

El descubrimiento de la grabación de una petenera grabada por mi tía abuela y mi tío, me ha permitido ver su historia, la historia de mi familia y de los inmigrantes invisibles que emigraron de manera no muy legal encontrándose en las plantaciones de azúcar de Hawái.

En 1912, mi tía abuela y mi tío se encontraron entre la “carga humana” que venía de Andalucía para trabajar en las plantaciones de azúcar de Hawái. Mi tío José era un trabajador migrante. Nunca fue cantaor de flamenco profesional. El cantar flamenco le ayudó a encontrar la paz y a sobrevivir lo que ahora sabemos que era el trastorno de estrés postraumático, pero en aquel entonces se llamaba “esquizofrenia”.

Mi tía y mi tío grabaron una petenera poco después de convertirse en ciudadanos estadounidenses. En 1924, Estados Unidos inició una cuota de inmigración en España, la declaró un “país de mierda” que enviaba solo anarquistas y desviados. En 1953 la pareja Rosenberg fue ejecutada y Estados Unidos hizo un trato con Franco para tener una base naval en Ronda. No sé cuál de estos hechos influyó más en la grabación de esta canción, o cuál ayudó a mi tía y mi tío finalmente convertirse en ciudadanos estadounidenses.

Conociendo esta historia nos ofrece una advertencia y a la vez un estímulo: necesitamos más pluralismo cultural en lugar de puritanismo cultural, y necesitamos más empatía, especialmente cuando se trata de inmigración y necesitamos imaginar un mundo sin fronteras.

Keywords:

Flamenco, petenera, inmigración.

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INTRODUCTION

Music is not heard until it is heard. One is not a number, but one to two is the leap to the rational. Two is the rhythm of the body, three is the rhythm of the mind—and el cuadro de flamenco is a way to connect to the divine without the intervention of saints....

How am I here? Why am I here? To whom do I owe this debt?

The nuns came for my father and uncle because Spanish twin boys, especially in a poor *barrio* New Monterey, California, were destined to become “bad.” Yet Lala, their grandmother, sent them to music lessons offered by the WPA instead of catechism because the Catholic church supported Franco during the war.

My dad is a musician, and what we’d call now an “activist,” though he’d never use that term. He used to play the trombone but he hasn’t played in years because he murdered his teeth when my grandmother died. I would say my father is pretty “woke” for 78-year old, but now the term has become cliché. Last summer my dad went to see Spike Lee’s *The Black Klansman*, and, as he tends to do when he sees a movie he likes, he called me to talk about it. “If you want to know what it was like for me to be an affirmative action officer in Monterey County, go see that movie,” he said. “The Klan was in King City.” Then he joked that the KKK would really hate me as I’m not only Hispanic, but Jewish too. Such is my father’s *guasa*.

Amid the “woke” of San Francisco, I get sideways glances when I mention how my father went on and on about that movie, the character of “Flip Zimmerman” who had “skin in the game,” and the ending were made up. Spike Lee also edited out the extent to which Stalworth infiltrated Black Power groups, and postulated a way to work towards ending systematic racism—one that required inclusion, forgiveness, and and a leap of faith. Idealistic perhaps, but I want to hold onto a sliver of hope more than a fist full of despair.

Since November of 2016, I have been thinking about how the Reagan era affected my dad. My dad was fired from his job due to Reagan’s budget cuts to programs like affirmative action in 1982, the same year my grandmother died of Lou Gerhig’s disease, which we believe resulted from her work with chemicals in the canneries or from the sugar plantations of Hawaii, where her family had emigrated. I have yet to lose a parent. I do not know what that pain feels like.

Last summer my father had a series of strokes. When he was in the hospital, between yelling at me and my mom begging for his cigarettes, and telling the neurologist that he wanted to speak in Spanish so we wouldn’t understand, he kept talking about how I needed to see the movie *The Black Klansman*.

Sometimes I think my words need a new language. *Yo tengo mucha desesperación por palabras. Nuevas palabras.* What separates despair from *desesperación*? There is a fine line between despair and desperation. The *duende* is a goblin spirit, a trickster spirit. It almost sounds like the same word for “home.” I no longer fear feeling lost or bewildered, wondering how to welcome ache. I bite my lip and wonder, as I always wonder: what if the Republic had won the war? Would my grandparents have returned to Spain, and not experienced the Cold War and McCarthyism? Would we have had more memory? Would I have more language for it? “Never forget that you are an American,” my father has told me. It is what his father told him. “But also, never forget that you are Andalusian-American,” they both said. We were once bad *hombres*, anarchists, *rojos*, from a “shit-hole” country to which the United States closed its borders.

Beneath this skin is a history:

Estoy hybrid,

flora.

I am carnation.

See that onyx along the curves of my petals?

Yo soy africana,

yo soy judia,

yo soy india,

yo soy gitana.

Yo tengo muchos nombres.

Me llamo Andalucía.

Me llamo Al-Andaluz.

Me llamo Aurelia Lorca.

Me llamo La Petenera.

To step into the flamenco time machine of La Petenera, to step back or forward into time, we need a starting point. So let us acknowledge this moment, this starting point, this place, this continent, this country, these global coordinates. I ask you, my passengers with me on

the flamenco machine, to think about the coordinates, the starting point of what is in your heart—who or what you love and why, and how this love goes beyond the physical, but nonetheless animates our daily actions. To love is to see. And yet, in order to see, we must constantly unsee what we have seen? Shift perspectives and look for the invisible. Become the stranger in the village, as James Baldwin would say, and confront not just the strangeness and invisibilities in the perceptions of the world around us, but the strangeness inside of ourselves as a way to not just see, but to love.

I am living this history. I look around and think about the history of Al-Andalus and wonder, what happened? How did this happen? How could it have been different? It did not have to be this way. It does not have to be this way. Perhaps I am an idealist. I think tolerance is not the same thing as an embrace. Tolerance is not the same thing as love. To forgive means to never forget. We need to do better. We need more cultural pluralism instead of cultural puritanism, and we need more empathy, especially when it comes to immigration, and trying to imagine a world *sin fronteras*.

La Petenera is a metaphor for the hybridity of Al-Andalus, the spirituality that comes from cultural pluralism, and the damnation of those who think materialistically. We can see this in the ways the poets of Al-Andalus. Ibn Arabi and Jehuda Hallevi characterize the land as a woman. The landscape is a metaphor for the cultural pluralism the people may have wanted or had struggled to find, but the rest of the world still struggles to understand.

Recently I have been studying Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Quixote*. Ortega y Gasset argues that love is a divine architect. He says, "whenever a few Spaniards who have been sensitized by the idealized poverty of their past, the sordidness of their present, and the bitter hostility of their future gather together, Don Quixote descends among them and the burning ardor of his crazed countenance harmonizes those discordant hearts, strings them together like a spiritual thread, nationalizes them, putting a common sorrow above their personal bitterness."¹ However, what if Don Quixote were a woman? Can we call her La Petenera?

My essay will examine:

- PART 1: The Invisible Immigrants of Hawaii's Sugar Plantations from 1907-1912: Why and how the term "invisible" is used for this immigrant group.
- PART 2: The role of flamenco for the Andalusian immigrants- Was it cultural, political, or a coping method for the soul?

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations On Quixote* (W. W. Norton and Company, 1963), 23.

- PART 3: “Alma de La Copla” Why La Petenera? Who is La Petenera? What is the woman’s voice?

PART 1: THE INVISIBLE IMMIGRANTS OF HAWAII’S SUGAR PLANTATIONS FROM 1907-1912

Why and how the term “invisible” is used for this immigrant group

Was Lorca killed because he was a homosexual? Because he opposed fascism? Or because while other Spanish modernists distinguished Spanish literature as separate from European ideas and structures, he distinguished Andalusia as separate from Madrid, holding up poems from the deep song next to those from the Persian poet Hafiz and revealing the same poem.

Scratch a Spaniard find a Jew; Scratch a Spaniard find a Gitano; There are Moors along the coast.

Is this why my grandfather when he visited Spain during the Franco era was held at customs and interrogated under the suspicion of being Moroccan, of being Moor? My grandfather laughed; he had an American passport. Franco could go to hell. Is it this why I, in the post-modern interrogation of identity, am often confused for Persian, Afghani, Indian, Gitana, Jew? Clare, in Nell Larsen’s novel *Passing*, passed as a Spaniard. Yet, even now, in the 21st century my family is still tight lipped. “*Leave it alone,*” they say. “*Don’t talk about the past.*”

I ask my father what was the family name of his grandmother, the one who was six feet tall with the red-brown eyes and black kinky hair like mine who wore rings on each finger like weapons, and claimed just a little too much she was “not *gitana*?” My father says she never could remember. A Spaniard who couldn’t remember her mother’s family name. Yes, even in America, these are the Wounds That Heal But Never Close.

Langston Hughes is one of the poets who translated Lorca’s *In Search of Duende* into English. Hughes breaks with the “Talented Tenth” in writing poems in *The Weary Blues*. Lorca breaks with Generation of ’27 in writing of *Poem of the Deep Song*. Deep Song and the Blues share no coincidental echo but the persistence of memory.

My family’s migration via Hawaii’s sugar plantations, and their Andalus-ness within Spain and in the United States is rooted in a denial of blackness, as well as an exploitation of that liminality. From the Geneva Daily Times and Courier from March of 1907, the headlines are, “TO BEAT JAPAN IN COLONIZATION SCHEME: Andalusian Emigrants Being Sent to Hawaiian Islands.”

This is an ugly history where we can see the racial divides from the inception. The plantation owners decided to “bring people to Hawaii who were ‘suitable’ for citizenship.” They looked to Portugal and then to Spain for a new, “non-Asian race,” familiar with sugar cultivation, who could replace the “Asian menace.” Yet, they were not white. Many of them did not pass as white and they were not treated as white. The first of the ships was The Heliopolis. It held 3,000 above capacity, and the abuses of the journey are well detailed. The crew was Chinese, whom I imagine were NOT happy with the purpose, or the passengers.

And here's the irony. Though the plantation owners *wanted* a “non Asian race,” “white ethnicity,” they knew exactly who they were getting. We see it not only in the language used to describe the immigrants, but the way they were treated. Never mind the morality of it all, the legality was also in question.

So what did this create? And why? How has this history been told? No one in my grandfather's family knew how to write in English nor in Spanish. How do we document the undocumented and honor their stories? Even on the Hawaiian Spaniards Facebook page, where none of the descendants of the immigrant group can agree politically, racially, or culturally, it is an overwhelming consensus: the conditions on the plantations were deplorable. The sick were denied treatment and were regarded as lazy rather than sick. The lands they were promised were unreachable and un-farmable. Pay was broken down according to race—0 cents a day with payroll deductions added on by the *lunas*. This brings me to question why the Spaniards so desperately fled Spain in the first place, and braved such a journey on what has often been described as slave ships? What made them have to leave? Was it political, was it cultural? Or was it a state-sponsored famine and genocide that led to poverty and outbreaks of leprosy?

The blackness of Andalusians has always been liminal, but very prevalent in Andalusia yet is nonetheless an invisible history. The term “invisible” can be used for who the immigrants were politically, socially, as well as racially. The director of the Spanish Immigrants in the United States archive, James Fernandez, used the term “invisible immigrants” because when he first started researching the “Hawaiian Spaniards,” he was told that the ships to Hawaii did not exist.² Hence, we were the “invisible” of Andalusia. The Hawaiian plantation owners called us “white” when it suited them and shiftless, lazy, swarthy *dagos*, when it did not. In Spain, we are *andaluces*. Those in power wanted us to emigrate to “dilute” the blood. But it was all a construct, as many of us had or have family members who are Filipino and/or Asian. Our blood has always been a mix, what Lorca calls, “the global Andalusia.”

² Cited in James Fernandez, “A Forgotten Diaspora: Spaniards In The Us, *Traces Of Spain In The United States Archive*, May, 2018, <https://tracesofspainintheus.org/2018/06/17/a-forgotten-diaspora-spaniards-in-the-us/>

Ultimately, what does this mean in terms of who the Spaniards stood with, and what they stood for? On the plantations, promises were not kept. In 1909 the IWW organized a walk off. All the workers—Chinese, Japanese, and Spaniards, organized together. Only one Spaniard was a strike breaker. What matters most is who we stand with, what we stand for, and what we choose to remember and why.

After a visit to Ellis Island in 1920, a Congressman by the name of Harold Knutson called for a ban or limitation on Spanish immigration to the US. To quote Knutson's article in the NY Times, "They were undesirable. They were violent. They were in-assimilable. They were anarchists/terrorists, given to handling daggers and bombs. With the new anti-immigration laws of the early 1920s, he more or less succeeded."³ Knutson said Spain was "a seething mass of anarchy.... that was dumping [it's people] on us." Does this language sound familiar?

Power is in definition. But reclaiming power depends on who we stand with, what we stand for, and why we must remember what we had to choose to forget in order to survive. My Aunt Bella had to take her citizenship test three times because of this history. She just could not and would not say what she was supposed to say. In the newspaper clippings from Hawaii and El Pais, it is clear. The Spanish immigrants were "human freight," not regarded as human.

My grandmother's family came over on the Willesden, one of the last ships to come to Hawaii, that was quarantined for fourteen days when it came to port. This is from an oral history my Aunt Bella recorded in 1987:

"We had to wait between ten and fifteen days for the ship. So they had to spend all the money that they had to bring to Hawaii waiting. Well what happened, that in one room, two or three families were staying in the same room. Starving. It was a trick the Gibraltar authorities played, to get more money. The ship finally came, it had stopped in Portugal first. We don't know what happened. The Portuguese or the Spaniards, somehow, we don't know how or from who, the ship got infected with lice. There was lice on the floors, there was lice in the rooms. There was lice everywhere.... When we had to pass between the straights of Magellan, and was that rough, everybody was throwing up. Everybody, children, grown-ups, everybody was so sick. So anyway, we landed in Hawaii.....They got us all in two big rooms, a big dining room. All the girls stayed in the room with the mothers, boys with their fathers. They gave everybody a medicated shower—from the top and the bottom. There was no escape. My mother put me in between her legs so I wouldn't suffocate with the water because the water was real strong. My sister was seven years old cried out saying she was going to choke, so much water, she was going to drown. When they gave us little trunks with the little clothes that we had, our clothes had shrunk with the fumigation. Everything was too small, wool, it had shrunk. It was a cattle-ship. And they had just cleaned it half way. 'Oh those people are

³ Cited in Fernandez, "A Forgotten Diaspora."

going to come all dirty anyway, what's the difference.' So, we used to put bland kids in order to make petition so we couldn't sleep with the next neighbor. Well anyway, everyone was on the ship there was no recreation. The biggest recreation was, 'my lice would beat your lice to the line.' The men would draw a line and see which lice would jump farthest."

PART 2: HOW DOES FLAMENCO CONNECT TO THIS HISTORY AND WHAT DID IT MEAN?

Was it cultural, political, or a coping method for the soul?

My Aunt Bella is the aunt who had cats, and a *tabla* in her garden for the annual Spanish community picnic, which was always held on Labor Day, May 1st. As a child, I did not understand this date and to some degree I still do not. "A Communist in Spain is not the same thing as a Communist in America," my father told me when I was visiting our cousins in Seville. He seldom called when I was back home, but for some reason he called to tell me this then when I was in Seville. Was it because the word "communist" was no longer subversive because we could use the word directly over the phone, in letters? Or was it something more?

"And a Communist in Spain is certainly not the same as those Marxist poets you admire who sit in cafes in North Beach. My grandfather was not a Communist, he was with IWW, he was poor. But our cousins were."

I had no idea what my dad was getting at or why, but I decided to ask him a question that had been burning in my mind since I first started to try and figure out the history of our family.

"To what extent can we see these politics in flamenco?" I asked.

"What are you talking about? There are no politics in flamenco," he said.

"What about the photos of Grandma and Juanita in 1937 wearing their flamenco dresses? Juanita's fist is in the air—¡VIVA La República! And then in 1940 when everyone became Americans, and Juanita wrote over the photographs that her name was 'Jane' and Grandma's name was 'Anna?'"

"Why are you asking me about things that happened before I was born?" my father screamed, and characteristically hung up the phone.

This is very typical for us. Whenever we talk, I end up being yelled at for asking too many questions. Maybe he cannot answer because it took me so much time to ask. Maybe he cannot answer because he has been bound by silence. Not so much the silence of fear, or shame, but love, and a very ugly, ugly history that only got uglier in the 1930's, 40's, and 50's with repatriation, internment, Jim Crow, and McCarthyism.

In 2013, my father was interviewed on what would have been Federico Garcia Lorca's 115th birthday for the Spanish Immigrants in the United States archive. I had to hold my tongue and not ask questions, as he laughed. "My grandmother learned Eisenhower's name just so she could become an American. She *wanted* to become an American. She learned how to say "Eye-sin-hower." She became an American in 1953, at the height of McCarthyism, and had been in the country for forty years.

If I ask my father too many questions he says. "I don't talk about the past." It is his favorite saying. It was what my grandparents said to him. Though it has been almost eighty years since the start of the *Guerra Civil*, the descendants of Spanish immigrants who worked on the Cannery Row of Monterey all say they do not wish to talk about the past. They only want to look forward, not back.

It is a silent history many of us do not understand. Years ago, one of my cousins sent me a newspaper clipping of his mother when she was in high school. It was an advertisement for Monterey's annual *Merienda*/117th birthday party. The photo is of my cousin's mother, Juanita, when she was fifteen years old. She is wearing a flamenco dress and is smirking, while holding her fist up in the air, ¡Viva La República! My grandmother was standing behind her with a wry grin. Written above my grandmother in ballpoint ink is the name "Anna," though her real name was Carmen. Written above Juanita, is the name "Jane." This is one of many photos my father refuses to tell me about. He was never allowed to ask questions.

Juanita would have been a freshman in high school in 1937. She loved flamenco. The family saved money so she could take flamenco lessons from the Cansino family when they came to the Aurora, the Spanish Hall of Cannery Row. The caption of the photo reads, "Monterey celebrates its 117th birthday with real Castillian flavor." When I shared this with Jim Fernandez who has been editing the Spanish Immigrants in the United States archive, he noted how the photo offered an amazing juxtaposition: Monterey celebrates a faux-Spanish heritage with its annual *Merienda* where the local Spanish immigrants dress up like Spaniards. But they interrupt the pageant with a gesture that anchors them in real time, real space, real ideology.

Indeed, 1937 was the same year that the Spanish community came together in support of the Republic and had anti-fascist parades down Lighthouse Avenue. The advertisement for the *Merienda* was on the front page of the Monterey Herald, under the headline, "Nazi's Bomb Spanish Port," as well as the first overtly sympathetic article to the Spanish Republic from the Associated Press of that year: "Situation in Spain of Grave Concern to the United States."⁴ At that time, under the 1924 quota system, only 100 Spaniards were allowed into the US per year, and the United States had an embargo and non-intervention policy on the

⁴ Durein, John (photographer) "Monterey Celebrates Its Hacienda," *Monterey Herald* (May 31, 1937), 1; "Spain Situation Of Grave Concern to the United States," *Monterey Herald* (May 31, 1937), 1.

“Spanish situation” which, as we know, was not a situation but a Civil War, a refugee crisis, and a prelude to World War II. Many of the Spanish immigrants of Cannery Row conspicuously became American citizens in 1940, though they had been in the country for over thirty years. Most notable was Caridad Albert who stitched a flag of the Republic to use for her immigration ceremony because she refused to use Franco’s flag. Cardidad’s son, Dan, later became mayor of Monterey. All he will say about this history is the same thing my dad says, “We don’t talk about the past. We only look forward.”

PART 3: “ALMA DE LA COPLA” WHY LA PETENERA? WHO IS LA PETENERA? WHAT IS THE WOMAN’S VOICE?

I conclude my essay with “Alma de La Copla,” a recording of which can be found on my website. <https://www.aurelialorca.com/works.html>. My great Aunt Dolores Navarro is reciting the poetry at the beginning of this recording, and her husband is singing. Dolores and Jose Navarro were passengers on the Willesden as children. They were migrant workers, not professional flamencos. The song was recorded in 1957 by my father who used a device his band teacher had let him “borrow.”

Except for Jose Navarro, every male immigrant in my family died violently and/or tragically. Male suicide is and always has been the “s” word, especially when we look at the suicide of drinking oneself to death.

How does this song reflect the ways my family coped? My father understands the *caló* but he will not explain anything. “Don’t ask questions about the past.” For years I asked every flamenco I knew to try and translate this song and tell me what *palo* it is. Nina Menendez says the song is a *fandango*. Angelita Agujetas says it is a *petenera*. I honestly do not know if I can call this song a *petenera*. However, I will say that *La Petenera* is my Aunt Dolores who was eleven when she came over on the Willesden. *La Petenera* is my Aunt Dolores and her sisters who all had to go to work in the canneries the day after their father threw himself into the street in 1934 and was murdered by a drunk driver.

La Petenera is inside all women, and her *palo* in flamenco sings God into existence without the intervention of the saints.

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