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Carmen — A Mythic Female Figure

Conceived in the imagination of French writer Prosper Mérimée and set to music by composer and countryman Georges Bizet, Gypsy dancer Carmen is the literary invention of two men. However, while her origins trace back to the masculine mind, she has, over time, refused to be defined by those who created her. Instead, Carmen has emerged through history as a symbol of the unfettered female artist.

In her new book, "Carmen -- A Gypsy Geography" (Wesleyan University Press, 2013), Ninotchka Bennahum, a professor of dance and theater at UC Santa Barbara, presents Carmen as "an embodied historical archive, a figure through which we can consider nomadic, transnational identity and the immanence of performance as an expanded historical methodology."

Bennahum traces the genealogy of the female Gypsy presence in her iconic operatic role from her genesis in the ancient Mediterranean world, her emergence as flamenco artist in the architectural spaces of Islamic Spain, her persistent manifestation in Picasso's work and her contemporary relevance on stage.

"The book began as a history of Carmen and an archival and performative evolution of Spanish and Gypsy dance on the French Romantic stage," said Bennahum, a dance historian and performance theorist. "But as I searched, I became intrigued by the idea of migration. It's choreographic. I found I was really interested in migration, nomadology, homelessness and art as the receptacle of cultures that travel. Gypsy people -- flamenco artists -- carry their histories with them on their backs. So I looked at Carmen as a mythic figure, a woman from polytheistic lands in the Ancient

Middle East."

According to Bennahum, Carmen's history is mytho-poetic and feminist. "On another level it's also a dance history, and on still another it's an operatic history. But it really belongs to Carmen, who emerges out of the sand like an avatar and affects people by dancing. And inside the dance is an archeology of time and dancing and history. If you know how to read the dance, you can read the history," she said.

Bennahum situates the dance across time and space -- within the genealogies of various cultures that, as she says, may or may not have anything to do with each other, and Carmen becomes the connecting link. "She brings music. She brings dance. She brings the public presentation of the dancing body," she said. "She stands outside of all these places, but she is also peripheral to society. She is an outcast and sacrificed. In every case, she dies, because no one can accept so much freedom."

Carmen's story is one of liberation -- a journey or path without end. "Carmen is the most-performed opera in history and the most-performed in general," said Bennahum. "And we are in this struggle to some extent with this idea of a free woman.

"If a legal code is inscribed on the female body -- and it is, if you think, for example, about clothes and how covered we have to be -- how can Carmen possibly survive? The freer she is, we're just a little bit freer. But Carmen is doomed because most people can't live that freely," she said.

According to Bennahum, the book was an attempt to excavate and to privilege the body as a place of history. "If you understand flamenco -- or hip-hop or Native American dance -- you can unlock a culture's history. You can unlock a people's history. And you can unlock female/feminist history," she said. "Women live very much in their biological bodies, and flamenco has managed to bring a classical line together with an intense ferocity that feels like it's from another place and time. These geographies collide in space and time, and it's very much a history of the world. And Carmen transcends time and space."

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