

CRISES, FAST AND SLOW: A CONTRACT-GRADING RESPONSE IN DIGITAL HUMANITIES PEDAGOGY

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Abstract In the midst of COVID-19, I adapted an upper-year-undergraduate digital editions class to a contract grading method. I struggled to find models that suited the needs of my class. My course demanded a single, core final assignment (a digital edition), but almost all models are for smaller, cumulative assignments with which students make up their contracted grade level. The intervention of this article is methodological: what might contract grading look like in a way that supports scaffolding to a single, larger assignment? And it is critical and theoretical: how does this particular case study interact with theories of improved learning and equity and accessibility in the classroom? Jordana Cox and Lauren Tilton's theories of argument or rhetoric as 'gift' in the context of the digital public humanities provides a framework through which to consider the ways that contract grading and student DH projects together might imagine co-operative argumentation.

Keywords: contract grading, digital public humanities, ungrading

On Friday the 13th of March, 2020, the day my university first closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, my students and I were three weeks from the end of our final term. The end of a three-month university term is in many ways a manufactured crisis which took on a new valence in a public health emergency. We might have expected that the pandemic's threats to physiological safety would take precedence over the manufactured crisis of the university system. My observation was the opposite. The immediate crisis for safety and the longer, slower crisis of education and students' future prospects seemed to intensify one another.

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My institution in Canada concretely recognized the seriousness of the situation more than many others and introduced humane measures such as penalty-free course withdrawals, pass/fail options, online research and teaching funds, mask requirements and vaccine registration. Nevertheless, in attempting to shift to online and asynchronous teaching methods, we inadvertently demanded more from instructors and students – more volume, more access, more commitment, more recorded content, more small assignments. In 2023 offices such as disability resources are overloaded as students struggle with the stressors that are continuous with the pandemic. The fast crisis is ostensibly ending, but the slow one continues.

Both crises warranted a change in my pedagogy. In the following autumn semester, I was slated to teach the same upper-year digital humanities (DH) course that I had been teaching in March 2020, which became grounds for experimentation. I would be able to create a course using the pedagogical principles I wish I had in place at the onset of the pandemic in hopes that I could achieve the rigour and standards of a university course and respond humanely to the situation in which I delivered it. The answer for me was to implement a contract-grading approach. While many approaches to teaching nominally consider a syllabus to be contractual, contract grading stages a negotiation between instructor and students mediated through a ‘contract’ in which students choose which grade they will work towards within a range of options presented to them. Most contract grading approaches maintain that all completed work should reach an acceptable or passable standard. What usually changes is the workload that a student might choose.¹

In this article, I detail ‘project-focused contract grading’, which I developed for my course that had a single, large final project. I reflect on how this approach emerges from and questions its pedagogical research context. This article is ‘an experiment, not a blueprint’.² It reports and reflects on my experience teaching a course but does not present a rigorously designed qualitative study. In fact, attempting to implement such a study in the context of the pandemic would likely have presented an additional layer of labour – more metrics, more research – that was beyond my and my students’ capacities in the context of this class. I therefore exclude discussion of student feedback or measurable learning outcomes beyond generalities. I ultimately perceive DH and project-focused contract grading together to potentially construct a pedagogy that engages in collaborative meaning making with an imagined public, drawing on theories of ‘rhetoric as gift’ that emerge from the digital public humanities. Part of that collaborative meaning making might be to recognize the ways that students can be empowered to shift collectively produced knowledge whether they have high capacity to participate in a university class or low capacity to participate.

I. CONTRACT AND CONTEXT IN PROJECT-FOCUSED CONTRACT GRADING

My third-year class ‘The Self-Conscious Text’ is a digital textual editing class, which entails Text Encoding Initiative eXtensible Markup Language (TEI-XML) as well as theories of textual editing and is cross-listed with English and DH course codes.³ This class may at first seem like an unlikely candidate upon which to experiment with contract grading as a response to crisis. In my fairly traditional English and Cultural Studies department, this class eschews expectations that a DH scholarly and pedagogical approach would be divorced from traditional – even outmoded – methods like textual editing. Similarly, the course focuses on a small number of relatively canonical texts in part because of their cultural impact and in part because they are available outside of copyright for markup. However, the form of the edition proves especially fruitful ground for teaching students a mode of argumentation that is also rhetorical invitation. Editions can imagine an editor speaking to an audience and can represent an invitation to interpretation that a student-editor might guide.

The learning outcomes that I articulated for this course are relatively modest, and this approach proved to be beneficial when converting the course to a contract-grading method. My syllabus indicates that:

By the end of the course students who have learned successfully will be able to:

- Understand the broad history of technologies like print, the codex, and the Web
- Identify aesthetic traits of textual expression like meta-fictionality, intermediality, and media specificity
- Understand editorial theory and practice
- Use digital humanities methodologies
- Build on elemental digital skills to produce critical digital resources
- Engage critically and creatively with their own and others’ digital texts
- Create a coherent, critical textual object within the framework of editorial theory and text technologies.⁴

In the class’s large, core assignment, students produce a mini edition of a single chapter from a novel, fleshing out the TEI markup of the chapter to include an editorial apparatus comprising footnotes and contextual information, together with a prose introduction to situate the edition. Students create a research question, pursue that research through an annotated bibliography, and iteratively refine the question into a focused editorial intervention supported by markup. For the last four years, I have taught Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) as the core text, a novel especially rich for its technological imaginary, which elicits connections

to contemporary vampire mythology and media. Students are quick to engage with the novel and its vast landscape of cultural resonances alike.

I was confident that I would have a range of contract-grading examples in DH to work from. Indeed, DH's ethos to share documents like syllabuses and assignment descriptions has frequently been the expanded, documentary community within which my own formation as a teacher has occurred. However, few concrete examples of DH contract grading circulate.⁵ Most conform to what I call an 'aggregate model' within a labour-based approach to contract grading. Students complete a given number of assignments of roughly equivalent length and complexity – the more assignments satisfactorily completed, the higher the grade.

For instance, Ryan Cordell's syllabus for 'Text Technologies' at Northeastern University is exemplary among DH contract grading.⁶ The substantive difference between grades rests on the number of discrete assignments completed. Students who contract to receive an A grade produce nine lab reports and two unessays, and are excused from up to two class-preparation assignments. Those with a C grade produce six lab reports and one unessay, and are excused from four class-preparation assignments. Although the course does not assign word counts to assignments, by my estimate the equivalent volume of work varies from 19,500 words to 12,000 words. A distinct advantage of Cordell's discrete assignments is that students may all reach the stated learning outcomes, just at higher or lower volumes of output.

Cordell quotes Cathy Davidson in his syllabus, as I do in my own:

The advantage of contract grading is that you, the student, decide how much work you wish to do this semester; if you complete that work on time and satisfactorily, you will receive the grade for which you contracted. This means planning ahead, thinking about all of your obligations and responsibilities this semester and also determining what grade you want or need in this course ... I respect the student who only needs a C, who has other obligations that preclude doing all of the requirements to earn an A in the course, and who contracts for the C and carries out the contract perfectly. (This is another one of those major life skills: taking responsibility for your own workflow.)

Davidson's and Cordell's focus on labour articulates a compelling agnosticism towards grades. A student who chooses a C has not learned less; they simply had simultaneous and competing obligations and should be applauded for recognizing them in advance. In my own course, I echoed some of these principles in assignments that address the operational dimensions of the course. Students all completed an identical set of 'Learning Ownership Assignments', a grading contract, a mid-term contract revision meeting and a final self-

assessment. All of these assignments were mechanisms for validating students' motivations for choosing, revising and reflecting on workload and grade level.

However, the media specificity of the digital edition requires a certain coherence of form at odds with the aggregate model. My challenge was to set out grade contracts that preserved the central rhetorical form of the edition and the iterative process of research, propositional intervention, and imagination of an audience. Unlike the aggregate model in which the intellectual scope of each discrete assignment remains the same while the volume of output increases, when an edition increases in size, so, too, does its intellectual complexity, and so students also had to choose the qualitative dimensions of project complexity while choosing their grade.

My approach was to identify a base level of complexity that could reasonably meet the learning outcomes of the course, and then to build versions of greater scope and complexity on that base. In my DH classes, scope and complexity apply equally to written and technical components of the course, and I teach traditional humanistic technologies like writing and argumentation as analytical in the same ways as more obviously technologized tools such as digital markup. The 'Course Content Assignments' represent the most substantive differences between grade levels, with the C grade as the base:

A-Grade Contract

- 2 Mandatory Engagement Assignments
- + 4 Additional Engagement Assignments
- Annotated Bibliography with 6 sources
- Encoded Chapter First Draft Presentation
- Encoded Chapter (A Level)
- Introduction + Justification + Editorial Statement (1500 words)

B-Grade Contract

- 2 Mandatory Engagement Assignments
- + 2 Additional Engagement Assignments
- Annotated Bibliography with 4 sources
- Encoded Chapter First Draft Presentation
- Encoded Chapter (B Level)
- Justification + Editorial Statement (1000 words)

C-Grade Contract

- 2 Mandatory Engagement Assignments
- + 1 Additional Engagement Assignment
- Annotated Bibliography with 2 sources
- Encoded Chapter First Draft Presentation
- Encoded Chapter (C Level)
- Editorial Statement (500 words)

For preparatory assignments leading to the core project, course design retained some aspects of the aggregate model: all levels completed two mandatory engagement assignments and a contracted number of additional engagement assignments; students produced an annotated bibliography for which the number of sources varied. The increased scope of the annotated bibliography simultaneously indexes the greater breadth of research that would be necessary to support an A-level final assignment over a B- or C-level assignment. Volume, therefore, had to support qualitative differences across grade levels. The introduction, justification and editorial statement assignments made this alignment most explicitly:

Introduction – 2 well-constructed paragraphs (A grade contracts only)

Your encoded chapter is a mini digital edition. You will write an introduction that imagines your role as an editor presenting your edition to a broader audience. This audience might include your instructor, but is not limited to it. This introduction should evoke your motivation for putting together the edition and what you hope that your audience might take away from it.

Justification – 2 well-constructed paragraphs (A and B grade contracts)

In this companion to your mini-edition, you should indicate the theoretical framework in which you have undertaken your encoded chapter. This section should incorporate a few things. First, discuss the research question that guided your encoding (Encoded Chapter and Appendix), with possible discussion of the sub-questions that you pursued with each methodological approach. You might also wish to incorporate relevant concepts from your research and from course content. The aim here is to have a clear, complex, and evocative description of your project. Next, draw in descriptions of your editorial theory and practice. In terms of theory, you can draw from Tanselle, McGann and Buzzetti, and any other aspect of editorial theory that we covered in the course.

Editorial Approach – 2 well-constructed paragraphs (All grade contracts)

This final section covers the nuts and bolts of your editorial decisions. Here, you will want to describe the significant aspects of your encoding in some detail. This means that you should account for the elements you chose, why you chose them, how they work together, and how they relate to your research question or editorial approach (C grade contracts will need to include your research question in this section, but it will not be necessary for A and B grade contracts). Don't include discussion of structural markup that is required by the assignment – simply discuss the choices that were up to you.

At all levels, students imagine an intervention into a public discussion, even if that public consists only of themselves and the instructor. C-grade contracts demonstrate that they have identified how their encoding decisions are consequential to the presentation of their research questions. In addition to the C-grade requirements, B-grade contracts put those decisions in conversation with the editorial theories and discussions presented in the course. Integrating all grade-level requirements, A-grade contracts most explicitly imagine a wider audience of readers that might be invited into interpretation of their edition.

In a similar vein, the markup component of the final assignment needed to speak to varying levels of complexity and to be supported by preparatory assignments. Students who would be expected to produce more complex markup completed engagement assignments to develop structural capacity for ambitious and complex ideas in TEI. The encoded chapter required skills-based technical competencies common to all grade levels, like validity and well-formedness, basic structural markup, and functional linking mechanisms. In the C-grade contracts, for instance, students complete a proof of concept demonstrating the link between research and encoding in a digital edition, but relying on general elements, forging structural approaches and familiar research competencies:

In addition to the minimum requirements, C grade contracts will produce:

- 2 substantive footnotes with working linking mechanisms of 150 words each that incorporate your research;
- Use of anonymous elements to support linking (`<seg>` and `<ab>`, for instance);
- A well-formatted Works Cited in a `<listBibl>` with at least 2 sources from your own research or from course content. Works cited for C-grade may be in `<bibl>`. You may use a standard citation format like MLA or APA for references inside `<bibl>`.

In the A-grade contracts, students implement complex structural and descriptive markup that places higher demands on their ability to work within a TEI schema and implement valid and well-formed encoding while also integrating careful research in the form of footnotes:

In addition to the minimum requirements, A grade contracts will produce:

- 6 substantive footnotes with working linking mechanisms of 150 words each that incorporate your research;
- 2 elements of appropriate, specific in-line markup (this might include `<persName>`, `<interp>`, or `<said>` based on your research question and interests; only 1 general element like `<seg>` or `<ab>` can be used for this requirement);

- A well-formatted TEI Works Cited in a <listBibl> with at least 4 sources from your own research or from course content. Works cited for A-grade should be in <biblStruct> and should have working linking mechanisms to major elements of the cited works and to their references in your edition.

The edition's rhetorical form, the formalism of markup, and the rhetoric of collective interpretation are closely entwined. Practically, the mechanisms of TEI mean that the encoding on some level either works or doesn't. But I also strove to tie qualitative dimensions of digital humanistic inquiry to scale, rhetoric and attention and not simply to reduce encoding to skill.

At all grade levels in this course, students still need to grapple with the idea of what a digital edition is and how the form might engage with an imagined audience – they still need to meet core learning outcomes. Student motivations to choose a contract, then, likely align variously with different aspects of the course such as volume of writing or research, adoption and application of new skills, and humanistic interpretation and rhetorical positioning. The core intellectual exercise remains. This approach inverts the logic of conventional grading, which describes ideals from which all students will fall short and for which even a good grade reflects their degree of failure. Project-focused contract grading begins with the most elemental version of the core intellectual exercise of the class, finds what is valuable in it, and permits students to choose the scale of their engagement with that exercise.

2. CONTRACT GRADING: RESPONSES TO THE SLOW CRISIS

I undertook this teaching exercise in the immediate crisis of the pandemic. DH, too, has worked to locate itself within crises fast and slow, occupying the untenable position of, on the one hand, the saviour of humanities knowledge, or, on the other hand, a harbinger of encroaching neoliberalism.⁷ More generally, argue Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, crisis is a ‘core part of the project of the humanities’;⁸ the humanities are the object of crisis and paradoxically the only way to save a broader cultural or moral crisis from which they emerge. This circular self-definition has consequences beyond producing cyclical crises. ‘Identifying a situation as a crisis’, say Reitter and Wellmon, ‘can foreclose the possibility that it came about not because of an unexpected, sudden event but because of chronic, even structural conditions.’⁹ That DH has been the dubious saviour of the humanities, therefore, is not a neoliberal perversion, but a continuation of the ways that crisis has acted as a rhetorical tool.

Recognizing this slow crisis permits a broad context for pedagogical theory and teaching practices that focus on structural change in pedagogy. One of the most prominent approaches to contract grading exclusively emphasizes labour. Asao B. Inoue argues that the impulse to set standards itself conforms to systems

of oppression. Instead, ‘a grading contract based only on labor is better for all students and undermines the racist and white supremacist grading systems we all live with at all levels of education.’¹⁰ In a similar approach, ungrading, Susan D. Blum, Alfie Kohn and Jesse Stommel identify the increasingly large body of research that indicates that grades interfere with learning, and in turn argue that grades-based assessment and learning should be entirely divorced.¹¹ Blum notes that researchers have advocated for some time for measures like pass/fail grading that the exceptional measures of COVID-19 afforded.¹² Other approaches focus instead on choice that supports rigour. In Linda Nilson’s ‘specifications grading’, students meet criteria for qualitative performance within assignment groups or ‘bundles’ for which the student sets the weight in consultation with the instructor.¹³ Still others find a hybrid approach, preserving aspects of evaluation to determine whether quality will place a student’s grade above or below a mutually agreed baseline (usually a B) that students meet through labour-based contributions, an approach especially popular in technical writing, elementary, secondary and post-secondary writing instruction contexts.¹⁴

These approaches share a core recognition: that grades are detrimental to learning, that they emerge from punitive, carceral systems, and that those same systems have contributed to the slow crisis as well as the fast crisis of the global pandemic. As I and collaborators have argued,¹⁵ the DH orientation towards a structural reimagining of research – to think computationally about culture; to think at large scales about small things like books; to think at small scales about encoded words or phrases; to think in the aggregate of data and the nuances of power – often finds an echo in the structural reimagining of classrooms. For DH, this reimagining has most typically taken the form of anti-hierarchical or ‘flat’ pedagogies across classroom and research project contexts, even as we must acknowledge no educational encounter is free of the power structures it attempts to upend.¹⁶

My own institution and positionality strongly frame my ability to implement contract grading. I am a pre-tenure faculty member in a tenure-track position at the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan Campus (UBC-O) in Canada, which sits on unceded Syilx (Okanagan) territory.¹⁷ Despite my pre-tenure status, I enjoy relative freedom in implementing grading methods within a system that retains grades, but little (and decreasing) ability to identify and change the ways that grades themselves might be detrimental to student learning. UBC-O increasingly looks at making learning outcomes and grading approaches centrally governed dimensions of courses, partially motivated by our provincial government. As in many universities, this centralization puts a faith in learning outcomes that is poorly supported by research.¹⁸ These institutional restrictions shaped my course design in two ways. First, my learning outcomes were already modest, and I was able to imagine and build upon the most elemental version of their execution. Second, I retained the ability to evaluate student work as

minimally proficient, proficient or excellent, and therefore to tip a B contract towards a B plus or B minus. These approaches are compromises. They satisfy the university's needs while attempting to work against them, and they retain dimensions of evaluation that we know to interfere with learning.

Nevertheless, contract grading was still palpably beneficial, at least for my own affective relationship to students and the learning exercise. Judith Enriquez notes that pedagogical documents establish incidental, collateral realities that cloud the emergent nature of learning.¹⁹ In my previous course design, learning outcomes made the argument that learning could be measurable and consistent on my behalf. In contract grading, grades and assignment samples became imaginative examples. Students, in turn, produced exemplary work, far better than any of the years I had previously taught this course: they balanced the nuts and bolts of encoding and writing with imaginative argumentation embedded in research and in the very form of their editions.

The unchanged or increased quality of student work in contract grading – rigour – is the frequent rebuttal to individual and institutional fears about alternative grading.²⁰ For instance, Roopika Risam uses specifications grading to critique the carceral and colonialist underpinnings of grading, shifting focus to strengths and growth areas that students might demonstrate instead.²¹ In a university context with especially rigid alignment of grades to rigour, Risam acknowledges both that students are structured by the punitive systems in which they participate and provides the tools by which they might shift these standards to their own definitions. Vineeta Singh observes that rigour becomes one tool of compliance. Students can instead ‘be workers who are theorists of their own experiences and fields of work; who, as workers deserve a say in how they are evaluated and assessed; who as workers have a right to self-determination in setting the conditions of their labor and demanding accountability from decision-makers’.²² Even as I made decisions in my own course to satisfy the institutional structures of which I am part, so do theorists and practitioners of contract grading use concepts like rigour as a way of making space for practices that critique it.

Alongside these strategic approaches is an increasingly prominent critique – which I hope to contribute to – that grading systems that focus on labour to the exclusion of other forms of value unintentionally reproduce injustices they seek to address. For Ellen C. Carillo, labour-based grading may replace one ableist standard with another, exacerbating the labour of access for multiply marginalized and disabled students.²³ As Sherri Craig argues, the ability to implement contract grading in the first place rests on the structures of power and inequality that students and teachers alike bring to the classroom.²⁴ Within an anti-Black racist university system, says Craig, how could Black students trust that white instructors’ new grading approaches would not harm them? And how can a university ask a pre-tenure, Black woman professor to convince students that the years of pedagogy and institutions they are used to are wrong?

I am a white, immigrant/settler, cis-gendered woman, and the majority of my students are not that different from me. More than half of the students at UBCO are from the province and more than 20 per cent are from the university's region, which is politically divided but largely white, middle and lower-middle class, from rural and small-town communities.²⁵ Of the 23 per cent of students from outside of Canada, the bulk are from India, the United States or China. The university has a small but growing portion of Indigenous students, supported by a post-secondary access programme and a unique Bachelor of Nsyilxcn (Okanagan) Language Fluency. Especially in this third-year humanities class, the majority of students I interact with are domestic, settler students. The trust that I ask of them is easier to access, and for students who have completed the course that trust does appear to improve their learning and experience in the course. I have yet to fully understand the ways that my course design excludes students before the course even begins.

3. ENTANGLED EPISTEMOLOGIES IN ‘THE SELF-CONSCIOUS TEXT’

Alongside the structural reimagining work that remains, COVID-19 provided me and others some impetus to implement refusals of cyclical crises. Restricting response to crisis to the terms of that crisis, however, risks '[reiterating] the very violence it seeks to avoid',²⁶ as Jordana Cox and Lauren Tilton note in relation to the crisis of the humanities. Cox and Tilton provide one formulation that I have found resonant: we do not need to argue for the value of humanistic inquiry as we so often do; we can, instead, craft 'a commitment to giving resources for humanistic inquiry—to activating the humanities' already broad constituencies'.²⁷ Cox and Tilton adapt Henry W. Johnstone and Mari Lee Misfud's theorization of rhetoric as gift, perceiving a subdiscipline of DH, digital public humanities, to be especially well suited to make this intervention into discourses of crisis. Rachel Sagner Buurma and Anna Tione Levine echo this rhetorical position as they perceive archive-centric DH projects in both classrooms and research to emerge from a 'sympathetic research imagination',²⁸ constructing domains for an imagined audience. A sympathetic educational imagination of this course might be: imagine how you fit within a distributed, mediated conversation around shared cultural knowledge and authority. Deploying contract grading in a DH class could take into account humanities argumentation as an invitation to engagement, integrating the potential for DH and contract grading alike to reimagine structural responses to crisis.

Like public DH projects, editions must imagine a public, provide a perspective, and invite and guide engagement. They position student-editors as participants in a long, digital and textual conversation around collective interpretation. The class questions how mediatization might construct that shared

attention, and how the students' own imagination of their editorial public might likewise be shaped by the technological tools and platforms they engage in. It is within this sociological, cultural and technological framework that we explore *Dracula*, focusing on the histories of gender, race, medicine and illness that are woven into cultural imaginaries of technology. The goal of class readings and discussion is to provide enough contextual and imaginative framework for students to continue research in their own editions and also lend explanatory power to the idea that representation and context are locked in a complex co-creation of culture, a collective argument distributed over time and media that students might intervene in.

This principle of co-creation with technologies, authority and long cultural conversations frames the class's editorial intervention, sometimes in unexpected ways. In a class that reads excerpts from Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* (1872), we discuss at length the introduction that queer-identified novelist Carmen Maria Machado writes to her 2019 edition.²⁹ In her erudite tone, Machado writes an exemplary introduction, providing conceptual introduction, justification of her editorial choices, and a nuts-and-bolts account of editorial emendations. In one engagement assignment, I ask that students read it as a model for editorial intervention and apply its formal dimensions in their own introduction. Machado describes a scholar's discovery of hidden letters in Le Fanu's study, which contain the originating text of *Carmilla*, the letters of a woman to her doctor, describing her physical and emotional longing for her now-dead love, a woman. The research in Machado's introduction is, however, fabricated.³⁰ It is a just-plausible-enough narrative, permitting an exciting and radical re-evaluation of *Carmilla* and of *Dracula*. There is truth at the core of the fiction: in the face of past authorities, an editor might present a new interpretation. 'The act of interacting with text,' Machado says in closing:

is that of inserting one's self into what is static and unchanging so that it might pump with fresh blood. Having read this introduction, I hope you will enter into *Carmilla* thusly, using your fingertips and mouth and mind to locate the lacunae where Le Fanu excised pieces . . . the hallways haunted by the specters of truth and phantoms of passion. See if you cannot perceive what exists below.³¹

The call here is not simply to question textual authority (including Machado's), not simply to critique. It is also to offer something new, to attempt – as reader or editor – to offer a means of co-creating culture and interpretation. And it does so, crucially, through the mediatization of the edition, constructed from imagined documents (letters), a circulating work (*Carmilla*), and the potential for a text or representation to be recast and reinterpreted (Machado's intervention).

The public that Machado addresses, and the one my students address, is provisional, imagined into being in the hopes that co-creation will continue across media. Cox and Tilton qualify that publicness connotes a particular rhetorical orientation towards engagement:

Yet, sharing a project on the web does not mean that a project is public, as Sheila Brennan reminds us: ‘public digital humanities, then, should be identified by the ways that it engages with communities outside of the academy as a means for doing digital humanities scholarship.’ Co-creation, collaboration, and shared authority are grounding principles of [digital public humanities].³²

This qualification echoes Amy Earhart’s caution against considering internet circulation to be free, open, democratized and divorced from canons and the powers that maintain them. In fact, digital archives’ connections to existing audiences – usually through institutions – have been the means of their long-term success.³³

In a pedagogical context, arguments for the value of public-facing work – work circulated on the internet or another space or platform that is not the classroom – are often compelling.³⁴ However, my politics and my previous experience teaching this course taught me that such publicness is often not feasible or desirable in pedagogical contexts. Not all students want their work to be public, and their hesitation to disseminate their work online or to solicit engagement usually stems from reasonable wishes for anonymity, privacy and the ability to opt out of algorithmic oppressions.³⁵ Further, the standards for engagement in digital public humanities are beyond what we can reasonably accomplish in a 13-week class. Accessibility and equity also mean that it is my responsibility to uphold students’ safety and access in the classroom. For this class, the ‘public’ dimension focused on the imagined publics that editorial theory and reception studies readings in the class allowed us to theorize. As a public ‘exists by virtue of being addressed’,³⁶ students can imagine who they wish to offer collaborative interpretation to, using texts and documents as potential recombinations ‘for constructing further sets of transmissional possibilities’.³⁷ Students in this course, then, do not contribute their class work to a public venue.³⁸ It is possible, perhaps preferable, to meet pragmatic concerns like their privacy while also meaningfully constructing the rhetorical gift in imagined audiences.

4. THE WORK THAT REMAINS

Contract grading was, for me, an experiment prompted by the COVID-19 crisis, and project-focused contract grading a pragmatic development of existing

practices. Redesigning my course had a distinct advantage for the operations of the class. It resulted in clearer assignment descriptions, imaginative samples of assignments, and more carefully scaffolded learning. The course was already in good shape: I had developed much of this material iteratively since 2014. Contract grading made my previous refinements more legible. Some of the pragmatic decisions that I made in the context of my institution – minimal learning outcomes and retention of some evaluation within grade levels – may also provide some strategies for instructors who may wish to develop project-focused contract grading for their own courses. Working from modest learning outcomes might allow instructors to implement contract grading in instructional contexts that centrally approve learning outcomes. For me, minimal learning outcomes helped me to conceive of the base level of scope and complexity for large projects and to build from that base. Retaining some evaluation within grade levels allowed me to experiment with course design without approval for measures like pass/fail grading, a tactic that may be essential for instructors in some institutions.

Beyond these pragmatic dimensions, project-focused contract grading has become a way to teach that makes some small change in the slow crisis and a way to think generously with my students. I found myself oriented towards imagination and generosity even in the course’s governing documents. I could speak to the merits of work in C-grade contracts equally to the merits of A-grades, and I could look to interlocutors like Machado for ways that students could, too, position their editions rhetorically within an imagined public. This orientation towards generosity is something I hope future instructors might further develop, for both its affective and its concrete benefits. In order to help students understand the distinctions in scope across the grade levels, for instance, the description of the core assignment offered imagined examples of projects. In offering imaginative models to students, I unintentionally improved my approach to a topic I frequently struggled to teach: intellectual scope. I hope, too, that a refusal of the slow crisis that project-focused contract grading might provide will improve prospective instructors’ teaching in similar ways.

In my own future applications of project-focused contract grading, I wish to consider how I can separate the nuts-and-bolts technical dimensions of encoding and writing from the qualitative learning of the course, aligning more closely with ungrading. I also wish to provide students with more meaningful ways of revising their grade contracts at mid-term. While it was easy for students who, for instance, had chosen an A contract to revise to B, it was much more difficult to revise from a B to an A as students had chosen an intellectual scope for their project at the beginning of the term. Finally, the increased engagement assignment requirements of the course that align with the aggregate model inadvertently made it easier for A-contract students to perform the core intellectual exercises of the edition than B- and C-contract students. I wish to

improve the support for students who choose these lower-grade contracts to meet the base level of scope and complexity.

I am hopeful that instructors will, increasingly, take up these experiments. Since 2019 I have observed another shift in DH pedagogy that I also hope this work can support. At DH training institutes, there appears anecdotally to be an increasing interest in the pedagogical dimensions of TEI. Not unlike TEI, DH pedagogy may increasingly act as an entry point to the research field. I have distributed traditional and contract grading pedagogical materials to over 90 teachers and researchers as case studies, and I provide those same contract-grading resources in this article's GitHub repository.

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END NOTES

¹ I have omitted discussion of grades related to behavioural standards and class contributions in contract grading from this article, but they deserve close scrutiny.

² Many thanks to my blind reviewers for this turn of phrase.

³ Constance Crompton is the originating instructor of this course. I have adapted much of her syllabus.

⁴ I include all syllabus and assignment description materials in my GitHub under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence (<https://github.com/ecbmurphy/ProjectFocusedContractGrading>).

⁵ They do sometimes circulate by another name. Carrie Shroeder and Samuel A. Rebelsky use 'specifications grading' similarly to contract grading: C. Schroeder, 'Assignments and Evaluation', course documents in Introduction to Digital Humanities, 2020, <https://dh2020.carrieschroeder.net/assignments-and-evaluation/>, last accessed 30 May 2023; S. Rebelsky, 'Syllabus', course documents in CSC151 Functional Problem Solving, 2020, <https://rebelsky.cs.grinnell.edu/Courses/CSC151/2020Fa2/syllabus/>, last accessed 30 May 2023. For examples of the ways that undergraduate contract grading has informed expanded consultative grading practices in graduate DH courses, see L. Thomas, 'ENG 612/MLL 772 Topics in DH: Humanities Data Spring 2022', course documents, 2022, <https://lindsaythomas.net/eng612s22/>, last accessed 30 May 2023. For discussion of how peer review may be used within DH contract grading, see C. Davidson, 'Contract grading and peer review', in D. Buck, ed., *Crowdsourcing ungrading*, online book, 2021, <https://pressbooks.howardcc.edu/ungrading/chapter/contract-grading-and-peer-review/>, last accessed 30 May 2023.

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- ²⁹ C. M. Machado, ‘You are mine: obsession, odylic influences, and Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*’, introduction to J. S. Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, ed. Carmen Maria Machado (Philadelphia, PA, 2019), i–ix.
- ³⁰ In Machado’s fictional introduction the scholar is employed at the University of Iowa, where Machado did her MFA; Abraham Van Helsing is a real, historical figure; the Solo 9 comet hangs in the sky over Hungary in the 1850s, Ireland in 1973 and again in New Mexico in 2018. Machado’s oeuvre plays with fact, knowability and style across memoir and science fiction/fantasy genres.
- ³¹ Machado, ‘You are mine’, ix.
- ³² Cox and Tilton, ‘The digital public humanities’, 131.
- ³³ A. Earhart, ‘What’s in and what’s out: digital canon cautions’, in *Traces of the old, uses of the new: The emergence of digital literary studies* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2015), 62–89. Cited here at 82.
- ³⁴ See J. Jenstad, K. McLean-Fiander and K. R. McPherson, ‘The MoEML pedagogical partnership program’, *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 11, 3 (2017), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/11/3/000302/000302.html>
- ³⁵ See S. U. Noble, *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism* (New York, 2018).
- ³⁶ M. Warner, *Publics and counterpublics* (New York, 2005), 50.
- ³⁷ J. McGann, *Radiant textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* (New York, 2000), 2.
- ³⁸ I have previously asked students to publish their work in repositories like TAPAS, which warmly supported my use of the platform. See TEI Archiving, Publishing, and Access Service, <https://www.tapasproject.org/>.



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"The lissome lady from Spain": building Canadian modernism and flamenco dance in performance archives

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ABSTRACT

This article recovers the training and early career of Barbara Mary Beck "Conchita Triana" (1912–2006), the first professional flamenco dancer in Canada, whose professional career spanned from 1938 into the late 1950s. This recovery entails an exploration of archival records, analysis of the role of Spain for modernist Canadian artists across disciplines, performance histories of Canadian, American, and Spanish artists, and close reading of archival dance notation. Together, these contexts allow us to analyze the construction and emergence of a Canadian settler identity in the 1930s alongside a home-grown Canadian flamenco dance. Performance of an ostensible exotic import – on the stage and through the appropriation of Spanish identity – reinforces the legitimacy of white settler identity through the "mosaic" metaphor that dominates 1920s and 1930s conceptualization of Canada, positioning itself for the first time as a nation distinct from Britain. Spanish cultural performance as a tool to explore Canadian settler identity remains relevant today, as Canadian flamenco artists continue to interrogate their own national identities through the artform.

KEYWORDS

Flamenco; Canada; Spain; 1930s; nation; archives

Introduction

Emily Christina Murphy: Three years into my training in flamenco, I had finished taking an intermediate class with Esmeralda Enrique at the Academy of Spanish Dance in Toronto and noticed a one-page flyer distributed by the Dance Collection Danse archives. "Conchita Triana—Biography, Born: June 9, 1912, Toronto, Ontario," it announced:

Born Barbara Mary Beck and raised in the upscale Toronto neighbourhood of Rosedale, Conchita Triana studied Spanish and flamenco dance with Toronto teacher Elisa Lopez. Lopez recognized Triana's talent and aptitude for the Spanish styles and encouraged her to travel to New York City to train with Juan de Beaucaire y Montalvo.

The flyer surprised me: all of the accounts of flamenco history in Canada that I had heard perceived the 1970s as the "beginning." There is good reason for this folk history to dominate. In Canada, the multiculturalist policies that began in 1971 and

were eventually enshrined in the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms had wide-ranging effects,¹ one of which was a wave of immigration from late-Francoist Spain to Canada.² While Canadian policies drew in flamenco artists, late-Francoist attempts to repair Spain's international reputation facilitated their move out of Spain.³ Flamenco *baile* and a “nacional-flamenquismo” were “tightly bound” to Franco’s economic and touristic ambitions.⁴ The export of orientalized and exotic ideas about Spain paved the way for artists like Mexican-Canadians Rosario Añor and Esmeralda Enrique, and Canadian Veronica Maguire, who were the first to establish professional flamenco companies. It is this generation that has taught the current community of flamenco artists, including me.

Yet, Barbara Mary Beck/Conchita Triana’s showy grin smiled out from the flyer in promotional photos taken from the 1920s to the 1950s. Beck/Triana⁵ was a non-Spanish artist. And I, an immigrant from Ireland to the settler nation of Canada, recognize in her an uncomfortable echo: an adoption of the esthetics of an art form which is not mine, which brings along with it the politics of its signification on a world stage and in my specific settler colonial nation, and a new – to me – archivally preserved context within which to understand it.

In August 2018, a month later, I emailed Katherine. I had never met her, but friends and colleagues had mentioned her work combining flamenco and Canadian poetry.⁶

Katherine McLeod: When Emily wrote to me, I was developing the first version of *Poésie Flamenco* at the Mile End Poets Festival in Montreal. It would evolve into multiple performances involving Montreal-based poets and musicians, along with the integration of archival poetry recordings. I had been dancing flamenco for nearly fifteen years at that point, and I was reflecting upon what contribution I could offer to flamenco in Canada as a dancer and as a scholar of poetry. As a non-Spanish dancer, I first decided to learn flamenco when I saw it performed live and up-close in Vancouver, BC. I had seen flamenco shows in Spain, but seeing the traditional *tablao* setting in Vancouver made me realize that this was an art form that I myself could learn.⁷ The dancers I was watching had learned flamenco here – so could I. As I started taking classes and then performing, I continued to be drawn to flamenco because it was an art form full of emotion and expression and rooted in live performance and improvisation. It was and is embodied poetry, and I noticed how many Canadian poets have invoked flamenco and Spain, like Leonard Cohen, Dorothy Livesay, and Gwendolyn MacEwen, to name only a few.

Both: Our friendship and creative and scholarly collaboration established themselves quickly: by October 2018 we had begun research on choreography notes from the Conchita Triana collection; in December we met for the first time in Victoria, BC, where Murphy grew up and where McLeod has family. In April 2019, we performed (and practiced) together for the first time at a Canadian poetry conference in Dublin, Ireland, the city from which Murphy moved to Canada. Since then, we have performed an in-studio work in Montreal and a research-creation performance in Toronto. Exploring Beck/Triana’s archives has anchored our collaboration in her choreography, her historical moment, and her role as a Canadian settler. Our embodied, movement-focused conceptual framework to study Beck/Triana’s continued relevance has emerged equally from our practice in poetry and flamenco as it does from scholarly research.

This article is, to our knowledge, the only scholarly publication that traces Beck/Triana’s emergence as the first professional flamenco dancer in Canada. Her importance,

however, is not necessarily as a progenitor or founding artist in a continuous line. While she continued her involvement in Bolger/Lopez's school and did teach from her own home studio later in her career, we have yet to recover any professional dancers from among her pupils.⁸ This break in continuity is in itself significant. It reveals instead a sociopolitical continuity in which a preoccupation with Spanishness – whether in dance or poetry – appears at odds with Canadianness, but it in fact contributes to the construction of Canadian settler identity. The seeming incongruity of flamenco dance in Canada is one that scholars and *aficionados* return to repeatedly. Writing about the company El Viento Flamenco in Newfoundland in the 1990s, for instance, dancer and scholar Batia Boe Stolar notes that the binary between cold, Nordic Canada and hot, passionate Spain "is not only reductive," but it also ignores the ways that early Spanish colonialism of North America, including what would become Canada, is legible in Canadian history and through Canadian placenames. For Stolar, "the absence of Flamenco in Newfoundland should be more incongruous than its presence."⁹ We might make the same claim for flamenco in Victoria, Vancouver, Toronto, or Montreal.

We recover the formation of a woman artist whose contributions to her art form challenge expectations of her time and place, and indeed the expectations of our own. Beck/Triana might at first appear to be an anomaly: a professional flamenco dancer in Canada when there were no others. However, she emerges from genealogies of artists in Spain and North America, major geopolitical shifts, and performance and pedagogical infrastructure the traces of which she carefully preserved in her archives. In the 1930s, Spain became for Canadian artists across disciplines a lens through which to consider their own national identity on a world stage. Flamenco dance reveals how white, settler-Canadian identity constructed communities of practice around an imaginary Spain. In our study of movement, performance, and archival record, it is precisely these metaphors of construction and emergence that allow us to analyze a home-grown flamenco dance in Canada and Beck/Triana's training as a professional artist. This discussion will necessarily touch on the international dynamics of cultural exchange – indeed, a significant portion of Triana's training was in New York, and the international character of twentieth-century flamenco is inescapable – but, for the purposes of this article, we focus on Canada and its localized contexts and communities represented in Beck/Triana's archives. Our analysis first provides a brief history of flamenco dance. We then situate Beck/Triana's participation in imagined cultural constructions of Spain in Canada (1920s-1940s). Then we discuss her professional emergence through the concert dance forms developed in conversation with touring Spanish artists (1930s). Finally, we turn to written notation that acts as a pedagogical and performative record of Beck/Triana's training in Toronto and New York. Beck/Triana's documentation of her apprenticeship and professional career reveals the way that an ostensibly traditional Spanish art form has deep ties to Canadian modernism and nation building.

Flamenco dance: a brief history

Flamenco is a tripartite art: the *baile* (dance), *cante* (song), and *toque* (guitar and *palmas* or percussive hand clapping) are in equal standing. In its most traditional formulations, performance is a semi-improvised collaboration, in which *palmas* supports *baile*, guitar

signals the cante, and cante provides permission for the baile to begin or to punctuate the performance. Although the form has roots in *Gitano* cultures of Andalusia in the fifteenth century, flamenco travels through the “idas y vueltas.”¹⁰ The nineteenth century saw both classical and popular developments of the art form. Spanish movement idioms formalized in two distinct arenas: French ballet (Goldberg, Holguín), and the self-consciously nationalist *escuela bolera* (Mora). Although the popular forms crystallized in the *cafes cantantes*, or flamenco music halls, with the cante as the chief expressive dimension, the baile provided an easily exoticized iconography. For all of its history, flamenco has operated as what Eric Hobsbawm calls an invented tradition, “rural, timeless, folkloric, and unified by regional plurality,”¹¹ whether in Spain or in the “heterochronic and heterotopic” collage of Spanish forms developed in North American contexts (Mora).

The modernist period cemented the centrality of baile in the international imagination of flamenco and of Spanishness. Following the advent of film and the prominence of Spanish dance at the 1899 Paris Exposition, dancers like La Argentina (Antonia Mercé y Luque, 1890–1936), Carmen Amaya (1913–1963), and Vicente Escudero (1888–1980) came to prominence. La Argentina, most closely associated with modernist experimentation, formalized the relationship between the classical *escuela bolera* and Spanish and *Gitano* folk dances. Amaya, herself a *Gitana* dancer, bent gendered conventions in which percussive footwork belonged to men alone and made it a signature element of women’s baile. Although La Argentina died before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, many other artists left Spain during the conflict, whether fleeing the political régime, or taking advantage of the international mobility that artists still enjoyed in spite of it. It is in this context that Beck/Triana would be able to see Amaya and Escudero in both New York and Toronto. Correspondence from her New York teacher, Juan de Beaucaire y Montalvo suggests that he facilitated a meeting between Beck/Triana and Amaya. While little survives in the archives of this attempted connection or of any continued acquaintance, Beaucaire and Beck/Triana perceived her meeting with Amaya to be important professionally, and Beaucaire even compared Beck/Triana favorably to Amaya.¹²

Beck/Triana likely watched Amaya perform as an aspiring professional colleague; Amaya’s performance and public persona were also coded within an exoticized art form and a racialized performance of her *Gitana* identity. K. Meira Goldberg notes that racialized baile performance begins from the foundations laid by Spain for the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and that folk dance forms then mapped religious hierarchy onto phenotypic constructions of difference. These medieval Spanish origins of white supremacy, she argues, find their way into the complexities of Spanish national identity on a world stage at the turn of the century. She writes of the flamenco dancer as

an image paradoxically folding Spanish nostalgia for lost empire and assertion of its unique European identity, its Whiteness, into the image of national self as dark-skinned Other. The thickly knotted web of analogies entangling Moorish (African) Spain and the *Gitano* in the romantic imaginary is here entwined with modernism’s representations of Blackness at the dawn of the twentieth century … a foregrounding of the Blackness already implicit in orientalism planted flamenco dance into the iconography of modernism. (150–151)

This modernist moment is the one in which Bolger/Lopez and Beck/Triana begin to teach and dance in Canada. In the early 1920s, Beck/Triana began to take lessons at the

Spanish Dancing Studios owned by Bolger/Lopez in downtown Toronto.¹³ She appears to have been a star student, despite the rumored approbation of her affluent, middle-class family. Twice, she traveled to New York, first before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1938 and again in the Summer of 1941 to train in flamenco dance with artists like Beaucaire, Angel Cansino, and Del Castillo Chileno, who one Toronto newspaper described as the “leading exponents of Spanish dancing in New York City.”¹⁴ She adopted the moniker Conchita Triana, a stage name under which she toured Southern Ontario as a professional artist from the 1930s to the 1950s, and which she went by until her death in 2006 (Figure 1).

Beck/Triana was a meticulous documentarian. She kept newspaper clippings of her rich and varied performance career: shows at large venues like the Eaton Auditorium and Massey Hall in Toronto, in community theaters across the province,¹⁵ in a sponsored traveling troupe called “Lowney’s Caravan,” at fundraisers, at spectacles for the troops in World War II, at private functions, and on variety television shows. Beck/Triana kept hand-made costumes and accessories and photographs of herself, both professional portraits and shots in what appears to be her kitchen, at slightly awkward angles as though both she and the photographer are still amateurs. Preserved playbills and announcements of flamenco artists touring to Toronto and New York evoke the power of name recognition that many flamenco artists had gained by the mid-twentieth century. Among the most remarkable items in her archives are choreography notes, documents that rarely survive in the papers of professional dancers. Diverse in format and medium, scribbled on scraps of paper and meticulously typed and retyped these documents appear to be the notation practice of a student rather than a seasoned professional.

These documents form the body of the archive through which we piece together the building of Beck/Triana’s career as a flamenco dancer. The notes she took in New York became the pieces that she performed in Canada. Notes at first suggest that Beck/Triana had not yet internalized the choreography in her body, calling to mind Diana Taylor’s distinction “between the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” (original emphasis).¹⁶ The reality of Beck/Triana’s engagement with enduring, archival materials, however, blurs these boundaries. These documents of her formation bear the evidence of use and re-use, both on the material page and in their appearance across playbills. The moment of archival record is also the moment in which Beck/Triana forges embodied repertoire, shaped by the geographical remoteness of her training in New York, her evocation of an exoticized Spain, and her career in Canada. Taylor’s skepticism about the “so-called ephemeral” nature of the repertoire echoes in Rebecca Schneider’s articulation of the paradoxes of archival logic: “Does the logic of the archive, as that logic came to be central to modernity, in fact demand that performance disappear in favor of discrete remains – material presented as preserved, as non-theatrical, as ‘authentic,’ as ‘itself,’ as somehow non-mimetic?” (100). For Schneider, as in the Beck/Triana collection, textuality precedes event, and event is equally archival as document. Indeed, within the political contexts of Beck/Triana’s performances, the repetition of performance and engagement with choreographic document builds to a particular version of an

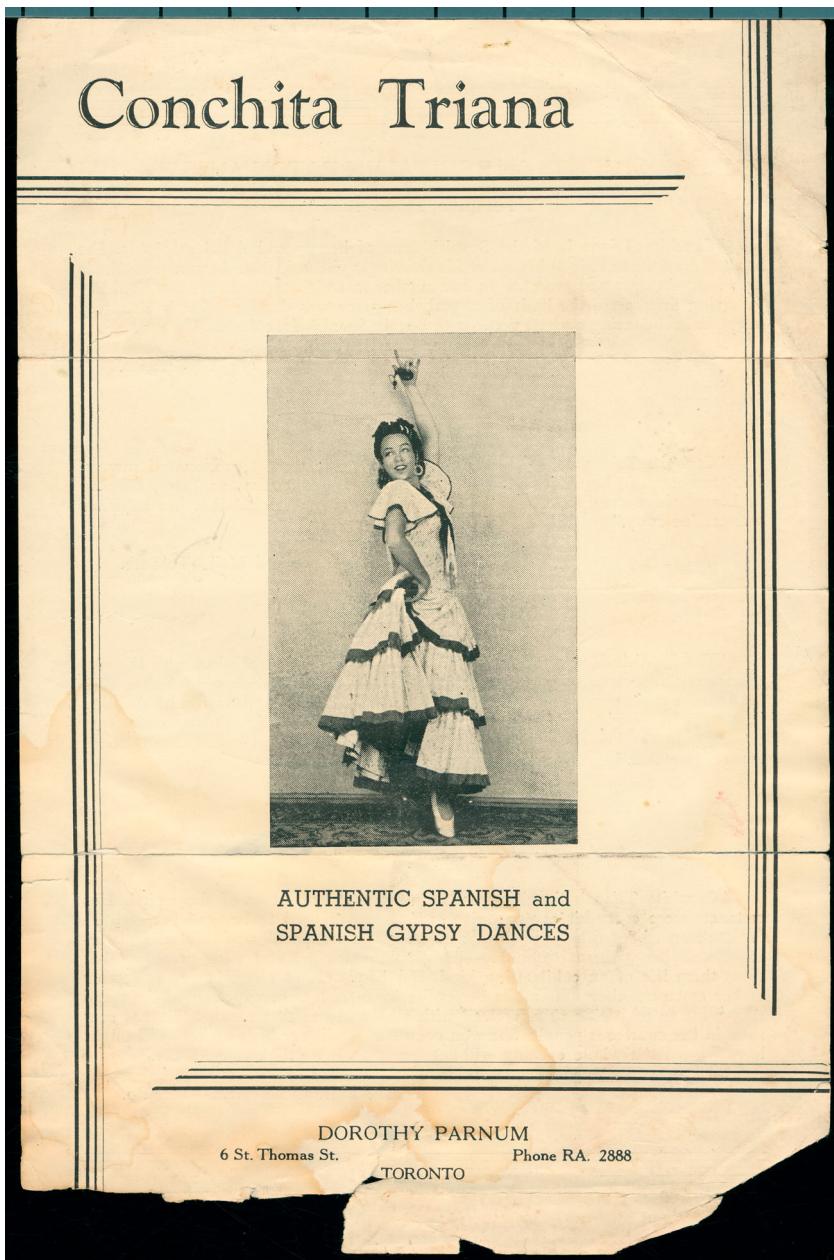


Figure 1. Promotional flyer for "Conchita Triana" from 1938. Permissions granted by Dance Collection Danse Archives, Toronto.

invented tradition that we might extract from Hobsbawm. Her creative practices "seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition ... [attempting] to establish continuity with a suitable historic past."¹⁷ For Beck/Triana archival documents are at once the event of her formation, a repertoire from which to draw, and a construction of cultural performance.

Circulo Hispanico

A simple, typed playbill from Beck/Triana's archives entitled "Circulo Hispanico [sic]" demonstrates two branches of the Canadian imaginary for Spanish dance forms – as part of a pluralist vision of the settler nation, and as an invented tradition that brings its own racial imagination to bear on its practice outside of its originating country. Circulo Hispanico, a "non-sectarian and non-political club dedicated to a promotion of fellowship and understanding among Canadian and Spanish-speaking people,"¹⁸ features dancers with divided specialties. Ballerina Marguerite Yanuzziello dances "Cielo Andaluz" and "Jota," at least one of which, the jota, is an Aragonese regional style. By contrast, Beck/Triana and fellow dancer Madeleine Kopal, who often danced under the stage name "Madeleine," appear to specialize in the "Southern" styles, dancing numbers like "Granada Mia," "Bulerías" (Kopal), "La Morena de mi Copla (Pasodoble Gitano)," "Pasodoble Torero," and "Morena" (Beck/Triana). The only performer whose name by birth appears to be Spanish, Tito Fandos,¹⁹ sings and accompanies Beck/Triana. While in North America "flamenco" has now become an umbrella term to encompass many forms of Spanish dance,²⁰ this archival document demonstrates the opposite. "Spanish Gypsy dance" referred to the styles constructed as Gitano and Andalusian, with a stronger esthetic emphasis on *zapateado* (percussive footwork), grounded postures, and solo dance performance.

These divided specialties are articulated for a non-expert audience by Circulo Hispanico in the very same playbill:

Our program shows two distinct types of Spanish dance. The stately jota expresses the dignity of the Castillians and Aragonese, while the flamenco dances of the south are gayer, more sensuous and emotional. The gitano (gypsy) dances are vivid and full of startling contrasts, with the strong rhythm of the zapateado (stamping and tapping of the feet) and the stimulating accompaniment of the jaleo (encouraging shouts and rhythmic handclapping of the spectators). Castanets are not used in pure flamenco dances. The gypsy prefers the pito (finger-snapping), the palmada (clapping of hands and slapping of thighs) and the taconeо (rhythmic stamping with the heels). One of these dances, the Bulerías, is often used as a vehicle for pantomime, to tell teasing stories about others.

The pamphlet's discussion of Spanish and Gitano forms speaks to an assumption that a Canadian audience might otherwise imagine them as uniformly Spanish. This distinction between the "gypsy" dances from Southern Spain and other regional Spanish styles is consistent with texts like José Otero's widely read *Tratado de bailes* (1912) and Cyril Rice's *Dancing in Spain* (1931), both of which were directed towards students and aficionados. Expanding the pedagogical mandate of Otero and Rice, the members of Circulo Hispanico attempt to bridge Spanish and Canadian cultures by focusing on the performative tropes of Andalusian Spanish dance performance. Sandie Holguín describes how Andalusia comes to stand in for Spain, as representative of "authentic" Spanish culture: "The 'Spanish Gypsies from Granada' ... were thought to be tied to the natural world, and thus to the people of the Spanish heartland."²¹ The Circulo Hispanico playbill likewise associates a mysteriousness with the southern region of Spain, Andalusia, and with its Gitano peoples, demonstrating the ways that dance can indicate racial otherness.

The flyer is undated, but its place in archival order suggests that it may have been a performance from the late 1930s or early 1940s. This timeframe is significant: Beck/

Triana and her collaborators are likely performing during or slightly after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). The club's announcement as “non-sectarian and non-political” takes on an additional charge. Legible in newspaper coverage from the period, Canadian “neutrality” in newspapers of record belied a sharp sectarianism in specialist news outlets, whether the pro-Franco sentiments of French-language newspapers, or anti-fascist perspectives in Leftist papers that drew on embedded reporting.²² Writing about poetry, scholars Bart Vautour and Emily Robins Sharpe have argued that Canadian participation in the Spanish Civil War marked the moment at which Canada’s identity as a distinct nation on a world stage emerged. The conflict was formative for the generation of young, leftist poets, memoirists, and novelists who formed the core of the socialist politics that dominated Canadian modernism (1920–1960).²³ An estimated 1700 Canadians went to Spain as combatants, not including journalists or medical aid volunteers.²⁴ But for those who did not, participation in the war was “an imaginative participation” because of the transnational empathy the Popular Front encouraged.²⁵ Literature did not simply comment on the events in Spain, but instead became “a catalyst for a meta-poetic expression of modernism in Canada.”²⁶ The histories of Canada and Spain are intertwined through the politics and activism of writers during the Spanish Civil War and so too would they be intertwined within cultural formations such as Circulo Hispanico.²⁷

Whether constructed in poetry or dance, Canadian nationalism projects a multicultural vision that represents a key strategy of Canadian nation-building. As early as 1926, John Murray Gibbon, a foundational author of Canadian settler identity, “suggests that new citizens should be allowed to maintain what he sees as certain minor cultural differences – food, for instance, or costume – while taming what he represents as their more extreme dissimilarities so that they can fit into Canadian society.”²⁸ What Gibbon describes in his canonical text *Canadian Mosaic* (1926) would become the performative multiculturalism that has been variously cast as mosaic, pluralism, interculturalism, hybridity, and fusion. Dance, especially in folk-festival performance, “simultaneously celebrated and controlled pluralism,”²⁹ and this rhetoric reaches across time and across textual and performance contexts – as true for Beck/Triana as for contemporary artists. Dance practice reinvents the principles that Gibbon articulated. In Beck/Triana’s performative co-construction of Gibbon’s vision of a pluralist nation, we might read Sharpe’s interpretation of Canadian literature, in which an “imagined sympathy [for Spain] can veer toward an Orientalizing gaze, or lead to a Canada-centric emphasis.”³⁰ The Circulo Hispanico flyer disarticulates distinct identities and forms within Spanish dance, and points to demonstrative choreography in support of the construction of a Canadian nation. The flyer’s vision of “fellowship and understanding among Canadian and Spanish-speaking people” mirrors the metaphors of the Canadian mosaic working to form an emerging national identity. The mosaic is a totalizing metaphor: the disarticulation makes Spanish and Gitano artforms alike into tiles in the mosaic and a tool of the performance of Canadian pluralism.

The other London and Toronto

When we move backwards in time from Circulo Hispanico, we find that Beck/Triana’s earliest professional performances prefigure this construction of Canadian pluralism.

Those performances also suggest ways that another set of conventions, in concert dance, intersects with flamenco's "transnational fusions and hybridizations,"³¹ and shaped her formation as a dancer. Beck/Triana's earliest surviving playbill is for a 1939 "Benefit Concert" in London, Ontario, a city west of Toronto (Figure 2). She performs alongside Violet Murray, an "Eminent Scottish Soprano." An archival newspaper review clipping,

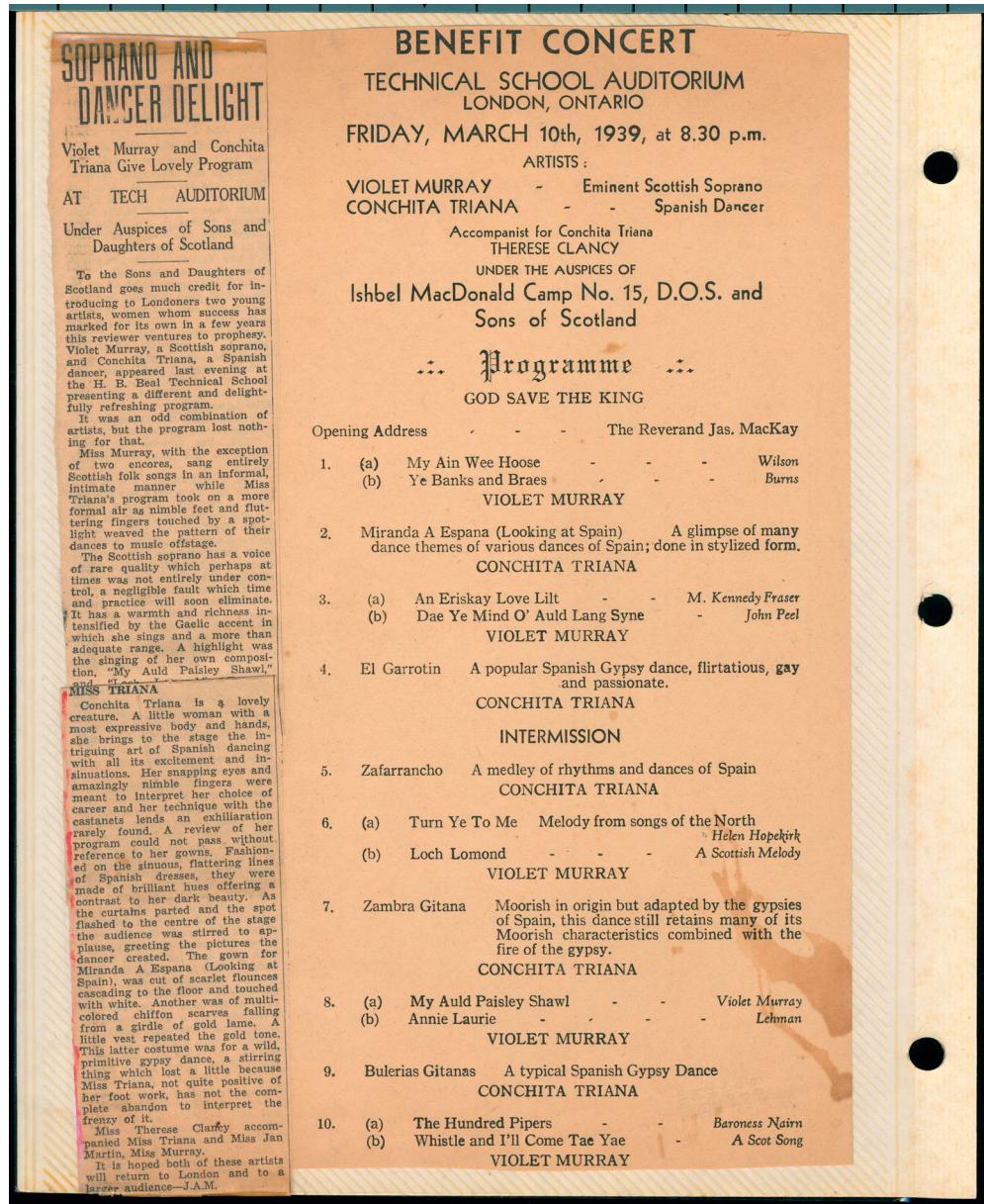


Figure 2. Beck/Triana's earliest surviving professional playbill from a Benefit Concert in London, Ontario on March 10th, 1939. Beck/Triana performed with Soprano Violet Murray. Permissions granted by Dance Collection Danse Archives, Toronto.

while favorable, comments that “It was an odd combination of artists, but the program lost nothing for that.”³² This was not Beck/Triana’s only performance alongside artists billed as Scottish singers, but the journalist’s commentary nevertheless indicates the distinction in the Canadian imagination between Scottish and Spanish cultural performance: namely, that Scottish ethnic identity is legitimately Canadian, while Spanish ethnic identity is an exotic import.³³

The rhetoric distinguishing Spanish cultural performance from other ethnic performances is not simply a process of disentangling which ethnicity holds more economic and political power within the settler nation. Instead, these two cultural performances together work to legitimate white Canadian settler identity. In Stolar’s words, “the import is celebrated for its exotic Otherness as a way of naturalizing the Nordic character of the nation-state.”³⁴ The playbill provides further paratextual indication of the primacy of Scottish cultural performance over Spanish: the benefit concert is performed “Under the Auspices of Ishbel McDonald Camp No. 15 D.O.S,” a military unit named for the daughter of Scottish-born Ramsay McDonald, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, “and Sons of Scotland,” a Canadian benevolent society for the promotion of Scottish culture.³⁵ The framework of the performance, then, explicitly establishes Scottish ethnicities as the default, host identity. We can imagine, further, that many of the songs – like “Whistle and I’ll Come Tae Yae” and “Loch Lomond” – would be familiar to Violet Murray’s audience.

On a world stage, exoticized dance forms and their affective dimensions like passion and sensuousness have often acted as a vehicle for building national and colonial imaginaries. For instance, in Marta Savigliano’s major study, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995), Argentinian tango indexes the paradoxical ways that “the Passion of exotic others confirms the shape of the Imperialist One … [and] conversely, Imperial Desire legitimates the passionateness of the other and naturalizes the Other’s rebelliousness.”³⁶ Hence, in a neocolonial framing, the others are “primitive,” and “barbaric,” condemned to a second-class identity. Beck/Triana’s performance certainly echoes aspects of the ways that tango is a helpmeet for an “imperialist West [that] shapes the relations between the peripheral Rest into relationships among exotic others.”³⁷ However Canada’s settler colonial context and flamenco’s role within it is distinct. Canada’s inter-war construction as a distinct nation is not necessarily “independent”: it retains explicit, legal connections to the imperialist crown, it remains colonial rather than neo-colonial, and it attempts to install an “Imperialist One” within the settler colony. Although tango, like flamenco, is shot through with esthetic traces of the Atlantic Slave Trade and discourses of Western legitimacy, this Canadian context of nation building is distinct from deployments of nationally specific art forms like tango. Paradoxically, Beck/Triana’s racialized flamenco performance reinforces the explicit colonial center that is newly constructed in the settler colony.

Beck/Triana’s period of formation is also the period in which many of the major dance figures of early twentieth-century flamenco enjoyed vibrant careers in Spain and Europe and had just begun extensive tours of North America.³⁸ In 1932, Beck/Triana saw performances by La Argentina at Massey Hall and Vicente Escudero at Eaton Auditorium. The playbills preserved in her archival fonds reveal how these shows were structured and their parallels with Beck/Triana’s own performances suggest that they provided a model for “Spanish” performance particular to this Canadian context.

Beck/Triana's version of flamenco seems to have conformed to concert-dance conventions: although modernist experimentation in flamenco aligned with other dance forms to produce complex, collaborative, avant-garde, and narrative performances, tours through Canada appear to have been subject to different constraints. For instance, La Argentina's particular intervention was in "theater making,"³⁹ in extensive collaboration with other artists. Her one-act story ballet, *Triana* (1929)⁴⁰ was "a work of modernist theater, designed by a cubist (Néstor de la Torre), composed by a musical nationalist (Isaac Albéniz with arrangement by Enrique Fernández Arbós)," and with choreography that was "modern in the extreme, both for Argentina and for the world."⁴¹ Further, La Argentina made an out-sized impact on the opinions of an Anglophone international audience. Rice's *Dancing in Spain* purports to be a general introduction to flamenco, and features four high-quality photographs of La Argentina, praising the way she "stylised and adapted the national dances" achieving "another plane" in the dance form.⁴² That Rice's book was acquired by the University of British Columbia Library shortly after publication indicates that his evaluation of La Argentina might have been shared across the British colony in the 1930s.

The late periodization of Canadian literary modernism has produced the truism that art forms that developed on an international stage took their time to come to Canada. Flamenco complicates this rule. The versions of flamenco that dance scholarship might define as *modernist* – marrying esthetic experimentation with the construction of nationalist character; undertaken primarily by artists and communities of expatriates writing back to a colonial center – seem to have been available to Canadians in the exact moment of Beck/Triana's initial formation as a dancer, albeit in a distinct format. In 1932, Beck/Triana saw La Argentina's second tour to Toronto, at the iconic venue, Massey Hall. While La Argentina's tours to New York marked the arrival of full-length, company performances from Spain since 1925,⁴³ La Argentina's running order in her Massey Hall performance appears to have been largely solo, and included both new and older works, reading like a sampler of her oeuvre. It featured stand-alone dances – Classic Bolero (1911) and Goyescas (1929) – excerpts from longer ballets – from *La vida breve* (1929) and Dance of Terror from *El Amor brujo* (1925; first performed as solo work in 1932) – individual works performed as trios – Ciel de Cuba [Cuba (Rumba)], Seguidilla (1929), and La corrida (1926) – and an entire one-act ballet – Danza ibérica [Iberian Dance] (1930).⁴⁴ Distinct from performances in Europe or New York, the shows that Toronto audiences saw abided by a distinct convention in which La Argentina's performance was as much a revue or retrospective of her artistic oeuvre as it was about the innovations she accomplished in the dance form.

Although Beck/Triana did not have a retrospective career to draw upon, her 1939 playbill echoes the sampler format of La Argentina's Massey Hall performance. The dance pieces start with an evocative overview, "Miranda [sic] a Espana [sic] (Looking at Spain) [Mira a España]," and move through recognizable palos like the Asturian *garrotin* and the North African-Andalusian *zambra*, presented with explanatory notes. After Intermission, another overview, "Zafarrancho," offers a "medley of rhythms and dances of Spain." This moment of emergence suggests that more than in other national contexts, Canadian audiences encountered concert dance as representative of other national dance forms. Canadian dance artists like Beck/Triana then adopted and adapted them to the

cultural performance that helps to shape settler national identity. At least two cultural commentators compared Beck/Triana directly to La Argentina in 1938. Well-established critic Augustus Bridle wrote, “[t]he Spanish (Canadian) dancer gave a youthful reincarnation of Argentina, with the customary clicking castanets, stamping rhythmics, and sinuously billowing finesse with her two gorgeous gowns.”⁴⁵ Similarly, writer Edward W. Woodson praises her “castanets [which] were every bit as expressive as Argentina’s used to be.”⁴⁶ Even after her death in 1936, La Argentina’s performances are still etched in Toronto’s memory as she is the go-to comparison for Beck/Triana.

Notation in New York and in the archives

In almost the same moment as the 1939 playbill, Beck/Triana was planning the first of two trips to New York to train with Beaucaire. Their correspondence suggests that she was welcomed into a community of flamenco professionals and students, that she had opportunities for paid performance, and that she was possibly not the only Canadian student to travel for training with Beaucaire.⁴⁷ This intensive training provides some explanation for Beck/Triana’s archival records – she needed to retain notes to refer back to. It also demonstrates that the context of her training was informed by Spanish artists touring to Canada and the US, but ultimately developed in a distinct Canadian and New York training context.

The dance notation in Beck/Triana’s archives is largely on worn, dog-eared pages: old flyers that lay about the studio, envelopes, letterhead from the Winslow Hotel in New York and Beaucaire’s school, and scraps from Alliston Paving Company in Ontario. Much of our research-creation work with Beck/Triana’s archives has focused on translating these notes into movement. One of these notes is a document entitled “Bulerias” (Figure 3), which is typed and further annotated by hand, indicating layers of engagement with a notation document over the course of Beck/Triana’s performance career. It perhaps first existed in hand-written form on scrap paper; with frequent reference it became unusable, overly annotated, prompting Beck/Triana to type it up, returning to it again to add missing information or new choreography. Beck/Triana’s notes use an idiosyncratic recording system, one that has often posed a challenge for us to interpret and stage; the notes have pushed us to analyze the representational strategies that Beck/Triana used as a student taking notes in New York.

Flamenco notation is rare, but it is not unheard of.⁴⁸ Unlike many examples of notation, Beck/Triana’s notes contain little illustration, and none related to specific choreography, but her notation system reveals aspects of movement unique to her own practice and the context in which she learned and performed the pieces. Structurally, her “Bulerias” will be familiar to contemporary flamenco artists. The palo is typically danced in a 12-count rhythm and structured around the *desplante*, or rhythmic interruption of musical accompaniment to indicate the beginning of a dance section. In her “Bulerias,” the *desplante* contrasts the “1st rythm [sic]” and “2nd rythm” sections, which map onto what we might now call the *marcaje*, a section of “marking” steps with little emphasis on footwork, and greater emphasis on circular arm movements, *floreo* or rotations of the wrist with decorative fingers, and *quiebro* or grounded rotation and tilting of the torso. Distinct from a typical performance of a *bulerías* which a dancer usually begins from seated in *tablao*, the “Intro” seems to indicate that Beck/Triana might

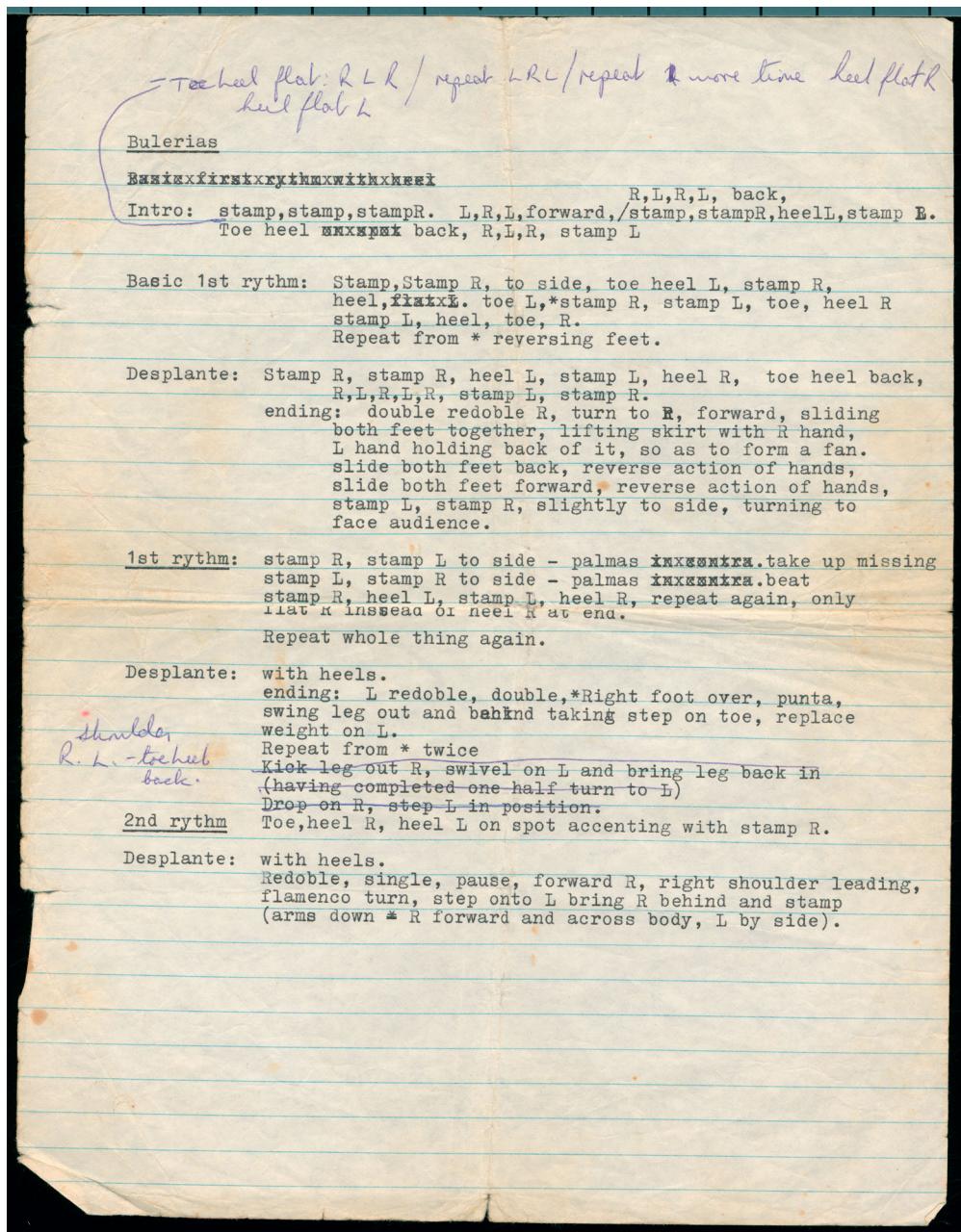


Figure 3. Typed and annotated notation for "Bulerias," a dance piece that Beck/Triana appears to have performed frequently. Permissions granted by Dance Collection Danse Archives, Toronto.

need to walk some way to the center of the stage for the performance, focusing on steps notated as "L,R,L,forward/R,L,R,L, back, stamp,stampR." We can imagine her walking dramatically to the center of her performance space in a concert setting. As other examples of notation "give spatial orientation but do not require exact placement,"⁴⁹ Beck/Triana's notation similarly suggests the variable conditions of her performance

venues, in which she requires the flexibility of a walking entrance in order to establish herself as dancer on a stage.

Claudia Jeschke notes that in some early flamenco notation “[d]uration is expressed relatively by the length of movement lines. Thus, without clear rhythmical assignation, the experience of time becomes experimental, as does the dancer’s encounter with space.”⁵⁰ Similarly, Beck/Triana’s notation is divorced from explicit assignation to rhythm. Her vocabulary, however, supplies two different descriptions of the strike of the whole foot on the ground: *stamp* and *redoble*. For Beck/Triana, the stamp appears equivalent to a *golpe* in the Spanish technical language of flamenco, even as the English word suggests somewhat heavier movement than the purposefully weighted, elastic strike of the foot on the ground indicated by golpe. When we first encountered these notes as researchers, we assumed that “stamp,stamp R” would mean a quick, rebounding set of two strikes within a single count – what we would now call a redoble. However, her verbal notation distinguishes the double strike found only in the desplante – redoble – from the stamp that moves across desplante and marking sections, flexibly asserting itself as the primary sonic quality of the dance or marking and punctuating the musical accompaniment. For us as dancer-researchers-moving to notation without musical scores or recordings-these subtleties of rhythm overlap with our own understanding of the bulerías in its contemporary form, in our own experimental encounter with time, space, and historical record.

The 1939 playbill marks a moment of emergence for Beck/Triana into her professional dance career, while the typed notation indicates dances that she returned to frequently across years and performance contexts. We have little beyond the suggestions of the notation and promotional photographs to use in imagining her posture, weightedness, and quality of movement. However, her archives include reviews that indicate the changing qualities of her performance. Likely in relation to the Zambra Gitana, an article from a London, Ontario newspaper reads: the “wild, primitive gypsy dance, a stirring thing ... lost a little because Miss Triana, not quite positive of her foot work, has not the complete abandon to interpret the frenzy of it.”⁵¹ The majority of reviews of flamenco dance do focus on stereotypes of unbridled passion rather than technique – a reality as true for Beck/Triana in 1939 as it is today, with reference to technique only insofar as it is perceived to enhance the fiery or exotic nature of performance and performer.⁵² Technique, in this review, has the opposite effect. Beck/Triana’s shaky mastery paradoxically bars her from the “authentic” wild abandon necessitated by the dance. For us as dancers, the review also suggests that Beck/Triana is still learning how to control the placement of her weight in a way that produces stillness and groundedness through the torso and facilitates the perceived “abandon” of fast zapateado. The development of technique then uncovers a further irony that the “frenzy” produced by fast, rhythmical footwork relies on a tension between looseness and control, and that it is a lack of control that indicates the inauthenticity of Beck/Triana’s performance to her Canadian settler audience.

It seems that Beck/Triana learned how to effect this technical control in movement as well as the circulation of her media image. A year later, newspaper coverage was more eager to grant Spanish “authenticity” to Beck/Triana’s performances, with one photograph appearing with the caption, “Señorita Conchita Triana ... the lissome lady from Spain” (Figure 4).⁵³ This trend holds for the remainder of her career. She exerts control over the construction of her “Spanish” identity: a typescript of a newspaper



Figure 4. Beck/Triana has two copies of this clipping in her archives, which is the only live-action photograph in the collection and features her dancing for the Canadian troops in October 1940. The hand-written annotation reads “This is very very good Conchita – no wonder they lined up outside to see you” and is signed with initials. Permissions granted by Dance Collection Danse Archives, Toronto.

article presumably written by Beck/Triana herself indicates “For Miss Claire Wallace” in its top margin, and announces “There is a little ‘lady of Spain’ right here in Toronto.”⁵⁴ This control continues in the archives: very early newspaper coverage listed Beck/Triana as “Barbara Beck”; the collection she donated omits the name, purposely cutting it out of

captions on promotional photographs.⁵⁵ At times newspapers offer an alternate origin story: “Conchita Triana isn’t her real name, but her real name is equally Spanish and more difficult to spell, and Conchita Triana is ‘better theatre.’”⁵⁶ The theater of Beck/Triana’s performed Spanish and Canadian identities were always in negotiation, improvising technique, and controlling how authenticity circulates.

Coda

Beck/Triana’s archives are at once intensely personal and deeply invested in the construction of a public persona, the performance of which extended far beyond the stage. The core irony of her Spanish dance career – the appropriated and widely accepted Spanish identity – also extends to the construction of white settler Canadian identity, triangulated through Spain and Spanish dance. While this article has focused on the Canadian context in which Beck/Triana learned an artform and began a professional career, we can also glimpse a set of wider connections: Beck/Triana’s community through Beaucaire’s studio in New York; a broader development of classical ballet in Canada which appears to overlap with Spanish art forms; and other Canadian cultural contexts like Montréal, Newfoundland, and the West Coast.

The construction of Canadian identity through flamenco is on-going. For instance, Vancouver-born dancer Deborah “La Caramelita” Dawson explores her own Indian ethnic identity in *Nrytia* (2019), “a story of an immigrant family and an artist connecting with an art form that seems totally foreign, but one that she is historically linked with.”⁵⁷ Montreal-based dancer Myriam Allard and her company La Otra Orilla push the boundaries of flamenco’s signification with *MAGNETIKAE* (2019) which stages flamenco in an unnamed frozen North and plays with such Canadian settler iconography as fur hats, hockey skates, and snowshoes. La Otra Orilla “embraces [flamenco’s] attendant cultural baggage – the history, the stereotypes . . . But, ultimately, it’s Allard’s firm grip on tradition that allows La Otra Orilla to reimagine the form with such rigour and style.”⁵⁸ Contemporary Canadian flamenco artists actively continue debates around Canadian identity – now refracted by the changing conceptions of identity within settler nations – through flamenco dance.

Notes

1. Berry.
2. While Canada saw very little Spanish immigration before 1950, there were 57,000 Spanish-Canadians by 1986 (Ramón Pelinski).
3. Holguín, 228.
4. Goldberg, Bennahum, and Hayes eds., 6.
5. While Beck/Triana’s and Bolger/Lopez’s adopted identities as a Spanish dance performers are important both historically and in our discussion of them, so, too, is the visibility of their whiteness and the option available to each to “pass” as Spanish. We style their names to recognize both their legal names and performance monikers.
6. Warm thanks are due to Hannah McGregor and Tammy Ishikawa, and other colleagues, friends, and fellow dancers, who perceived that our relationship would be an intellectually and creatively meaningful one.
7. In a *tablao* setting, musicians, dancers, and singers sit in close proximity on an intimate, ground-level stage.

8. One future avenue of exploration to establish continuous lineage is through a ballet school in Southwestern Ontario, where Elisa Lopez appears regularly to have taught, and her sister played piano accompaniment to one of Beck/Triana's first professional performances.
9. Stolar, 87–88
10. Variously translated in English as “back and forth,” “coming and going,” “give and take,” or “exchange,” *idas y vueltas* typically refers to a collection of dance forms that are self-consciously adopted from Spanish colonies.
11. Holguín, 228.
12. “Correspondence with Beaucaire Montalvo.”
13. Elisa Lopez's obituary announcement cross-lists her two names, with the entry for “Lopez, Elisa” reading “See Bolger, Alice Marguerite” (“Deaths”), indicating that Bolger/Lopez would have been known widely by her stage name.
14. “Spanish and Gypsy Dances.”
15. Many of the performance venues were cultural centres for Hungarian, Polish, and Ukrainian immigrant groups in Ontario. This history is ripe for further research: these venues were among the most important ones for leftist theatre and for Canadian working-class politics.
16. Taylor, 19.
17. Hobsbawm, 1.
18. “Círculo Hispanico.”
19. While we have little information about Fandos, his name appears in newspaper reviews in Winnipeg, Ottawa, and Toronto from 1933 onwards. The racism of reviewers who wish, instead, to simply hear “Canadian” singers, suggests that Fandos signified as non-White while performing (Chamberlain).
20. While both authors of this article have come across folk forms like *sevillanas* and *jota* in their training, these forms are often tacitly presented as part of the flamenco canon.
21. Holguín, 154–155.
22. Murphy; Peck.
23. Even a selected list of Canadian writing on the conflict is long: Ted Allan, Hugh Garner, Charles Yale Harrison, A.M. Klein, Irving Layton, Dorothy Livesay, P.K. Page, F.R. Scott, and Miriam Waddington. See also Weingarten, 314.
24. Petrou.
25. Rifkind, qtd in Sharpe 18.
26. Vautour, 44.
27. We have not yet been able to trace the antifascist politics of early-twentieth century flamenco in Canada. Ninotchka Bennahum is currently researching the antifascism of ballet choreographer Léonide Massine and Encarnación López Júlez, “La Argentinita” (“Border Crossings”).
28. Ibid., 10.
29. Lindgren, Stolar, and Sacchetti, 52.
30. Sharpe, 18.
31. Mora, 112.
32. “Soprano and Dancer Delight.”
33. Place names across Canada attest to Spain's colonialism from the 1700s, but Scottish settlement, with a protracted pattern of immigration across several centuries and all regions of Canada, “shaped place names and institutions, as well as the economic, political and cultural life of the country” (Bumsted).
34. Stolar, 89.
35. “Sons of Scotland Benevolent Association Fonds.”
36. Savigliano, 2.
37. Ibid., 3
38. Although earlier artists like Carmencita, the “Pearl of Seville” (1868–1910) and Carolina “La Belle Otero” (1868–1965) did tour North American music halls in the late 1900s (Bennahum 56), we have not found evidence that they came to Canada.

39. Bennahum, 180.
40. Beck had likely heard of La Argentina's ballet *Triana* when choosing her stage name. Triana is also a famous Gitano neighbourhood in Seville, and the surname of a well-known family of Gitano dancers.
41. Bennahum, 163
42. Rice, 38.
43. Bennahum and Goldberg, 19.
44. Titles in square brackets are taken from the program of La Argentina's performance at Massey Hall, and we have preserved standardized titles from Bennahum's biography.
45. "Chinese Girls Form Picturesque Guard."
46. "Present Recital to Aid Victims of China War."
47. "Correspondence with Beaucaire Montalvo."
48. Jeschke, 99–100.
49. Ibid., 100.
50. Ibid., 100.
51. "Benefit Concert."
52. Stolar, 95.
53. "Senorita."
54. "For Miss Claire Wallace."
55. "[Standalone Image]."
56. "[Conchita is Spanish]."
57. "La Caramelita Flamenco Company."
58. Smith.

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