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Wu Tsang in Conversation with Enrique Fuenteblanca

2 July 2025

Enrique Fuenteblanca: It's often said that *Carmen* is the most performed opera in the world. Although your relationship with this opera began much earlier, since 2023 we've been researching together the construction of the Carmen myth. You've told me that your interest began with a conversation you had with Fred Moten.

Wu Tsang: As usual, thanks to Fred! It was about eight years ago; I remember asking him: If we could work on an opera, which opera would it be? I was surprised when he suggested *Carmen*, because it's so popular and mainstream. He was talking about the music, the non-Western influences on Bizet, how the sounds drifted from across the Mediterranean and Atlantic. This planted a seed of curiosity, because I love to work on themes of fluidity, especially in music and dance forms. I started researching, and in 2018 Moved by the Motion did a performance at Miami's Faena Festival called *Love Is a Rebellious Bird*, playing with orientalist elements of the opera.[1] Then in early 2023, when I started working on the "big" *Carmen* for the Schauspielhaus in Zurich, that's when I began traveling to Seville, where the story is set. There, I connected with BNV Producciones, the collective you work with. I'm curious: When we first met, what was your—and BNV's—reaction to my project, given your work in flamenco?

EF: Revisiting *Carmen* means returning to a huge archive—a history of representation, not just of opera itself. *Carmen* and flamenco are different "fields of meaning," but their histories are intertwined. Both are built within a double tension: They're perceived as symbols of national identity, yet neither could have been conceived without an external gaze shaping them into myths—myths that, in turn, create reality.

You were especially interested in how the myth is constructed. I remember you describing how when you visited the "Carmen places" in Seville, you sensed the story was being told as if she had truly existed. In this "becoming real," you saw something performative, tied to narrative and identity.

WT: I was particularly struck by how real the myth felt in Seville, which is somewhat logical given tourism. Seville calls itself "the city of opera" because it is the setting of more than a hundred operas, *Carmen* being arguably the most famous. My first visit was hosted by TBA21, who organized a "Carmen tour." The local guide showed us sites around the city where the story took place, and I was so fascinated by his reenactment because, of course, these events were not real, but he was so invested in the storytelling that it felt real for him. To me, this revealed a layer of meaning: How we construct mythology is always from the present, always through the retelling of our desires. There seems to be a parallel process in flamenco, where playing with constructions of tradition is also invested with myth. You were talking about the tension between "the inside and the outside." How does that work in flamenco?

EF: We think of flamenco as a cultural field, not just a set of songs or dances. It's a political mode of representation—modern and "popular." In Spanish, "popular" differs from "folk"; it's tied to nation building but also carries a pejorative connotation—the culture of the dispossessed, the foreign, the marginalized. "Flamencos" were used as a national emblem while belonging to a marginalized community.

Flamenco, as we know it today, took shape when Spain, though still a colonial power in the Americas, was in its "decline" and becoming culturally colonized by northern Europe through trade and the exoticism of the Grand Tour. That is the Spain that inspired Mérimée and Bizet, and this is why in both flamenco and Carmen, you find archives of resistance and otherness, but also

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heavy mythologization. They are full of Western European clichés, but with many "gaps" in their identities. How did you experience that in your work?

WT: I'm fascinated that both seem to play with elements of cliché and what is "traditional." For example, you can't have *Carmen* without the clichés—the mantilla, the fan, the cigarette, the red flower, and so much red in general! Audiences are drawn to a reenactment of their fantasy—the otherness she represents. But you can also use the same tools that present that fantasy to destroy it. That's what *Carmen* ultimately means to me: She is a condensation of clichés and fantasies, but one that escapes actually being that thing. If it's done well, she remains ungraspable. Flamenco, it seems to me, operates in a similar way—the tradition itself is like a myth, and the performer is playing with the audience's expectations by offering it, showing it, and taking it away, destroying it.

EF: You're talking about the "ungraspability" of *Carmen*. You've tried to "grasp" her in many ways: your Zurich opera; the film-sound installation *La gran mentira de la muerte* (2024); and *Carmen in the Mountains* (2025), a performance that became a sound piece. All could be seen as attempts to capture her—but she resists. You're playful with these mechanisms of capture—letting the work move beyond fixed disciplines, seeking Carmen in "blurred" spaces. If you define her too strictly, you lose the resistance she offers. And we feel that she would rather die than be captured and lose her freedom.

WT: For me, the opera, the film, the installation—they were first attempts to understand. Perhaps the film I'm working on now for Carnegie aims to exhaust the topic in some way, but it's not about capturing her. The research became a way to keep working together, in this dialogue with you and BNV and Moved by the Motion and Fred, and with more and more collaborators entering the constellation. In many ways, it speaks to a long practice of collaboration that is about working iteratively, like an exquisite corpse. It's not about finishing. We keep playing with the subject until it morphs into another subject. I love the blurriness of that.

EF: In our exchanges, Fred once wrote, "Carmen won't leave you alone. Every time she dies, she comes back differently." Another key aspect is her multiplicity. If you tried to assemble every image of *Carmen*, it would be impossible—her representation is saturated. The same goes for the character: She's made up of too many identities. When we discussed the political aspect of *Carmen*, we approached it through "subalternities." She's a woman among men, a Spanish *gitana* among *payos*, a marginal figure disrupting military order, yet also betraying the gitanos in the mountains—always "other." She condenses all these aspects, which collide at the moment of possible emancipation.

We watched Basilio Martín Patino's film *Carmen y la libertad* (1998). It shows that the structures around Carmen cannot allow her freedom, so she must die. In one scene, Carmen's death is repeated using images from cinema history. If she didn't die, she would be captured—losing her ungraspability.

WT: It's a good question: Should she die? I don't have the answer to this. But similar to other projects I've worked on, particularly with adapting classics, I am more interested in following the original plot and seeing if we can go beyond without necessarily changing it. In our staging of the opera, we have three Carmens instead of one: a singer, a dancer, and an actor, who all embody different modalities. At the end of the opera, when Don José kills Carmen, all three of them die. That staging idea definitely came from Patino's montage of multiple deaths. We tried to go beyond this moment with a composition at the end that Andrew Yee composed: "Carmen's Afterlife," in which they borrowed from the flamenco technique of killing the melody (macho) by switching to major chords.

We also had three Carmens in *La gran mentira de la muerte*: Rocío Molina, Yinka Esi Graves, and Vanesa Montoya. In terms of these productions, there has been a practical limit to how many

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Carmens we could have. With this new film, however, it's so exciting to open the material to archival approaches, because film offers possibilities, as no other medium can, to convey her as more infinitely multiple.

EF: In the relationship between life and the cinematic image, how can we allow it to touch us without seizing it? I think all your films try not to "kill" the image; filming captures, but the image is never just what's captured. A good filmmaker lets the audience sense something unseen but present, recording the vitality that escapes the camera.

WT: I have long been obsessed with the idea of the image that cannot be captured. I think it's what compels me to be a filmmaker—that impossibility in tension with the desire to see and be seen by each other. It's what drew me to flamenco in the first place. There's always something in the liveness of a flamenco performance that escapes the camera—especially in sound and the way the flamenco *compás* (rhythms) can stretch our experience of time. Yinka Esi Graves has said that you can't understand flamenco unless you're able to "lean in" as the audience—you can't just witness or consume it. You can't understand it from the outside—you have to be inside of it. I love how this problematizes the presence of the camera: Can a camera "lean in"? It's an exciting challenge to approach filming with these questions in mind.

EF: One of your approaches is to integrate an "out of frame" perspective. In *La gran mentira de la muerte*, the animal's point of view is present—an impossible perspective to fully capture. This resonates with the *Carmen* myth: We've never had her own point of view.

WT: A lot of my films feature a nonhuman character, or explore the idea of a perspective that is beyond knowing. With Carmen, given that her inception came through the eyes of two French men (first Mérimée, then Bizet), I have always felt there is something a bit evasive about her. And many artists and writers, especially feminists, have imagined or recentered her narrative, so I didn't feel I needed to do that. Instead, I tried to lean into her ungraspability— to question the assumption that we can and should access her point of view. Film and theater both tend to glorify and impose a singular, knowable subjectivity. I wanted to see if it's 140 possible to play with an entirely different, or perhaps "non," subjecthood. I believe Carmen exists in the surround.

1. Moved by the Motion is an interdisciplinary collective, founded by Wu Tsang and Tosh Basco in 2013. The core group currently includes the choreographer Josh Johnson and the musical director Asma Maroof and frequently expands through ongoing collaborations with Sophia Al Maria, Patrick Belaga, Laura Harris, Kyle Luu, Fred Moten, Jerome Pesnel, Carlos Soto, Tapiwa Svosve, and Andrew Yee, among others.

This interview was commissioned as a part of the publication for *If The Word We*: 59th Carnegie International. Edited by Ryan Inouye, Danielle A. Jackson, Liz Park, Sergi Espinales, Michelle Song, Cynthia Stucki. Introduction by Eric Crosby. Text by Joselia Rebekah Hughes, Marianne Nicolson, Derica Shields, Haytham el-Wardany.