

BETWEEN SPAIN AND ARGENTINA: REPRESENTACIONES OF IDENTITY IN THE QUEST TO BE MODERN¹

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Abstract

I propose to examine the connections between Spain and Argentina through the representation of identity in Antonia Mercé's dances and in the construction of her figure as an artist. These connections are complex rather than homogeneous and bear witness to Mercé's process of exoticizing Argentine national identity. I will first discuss the notions of «Argentineness» and «Spanishness» in Argentina at the time, before briefly examining Antonia Mercé's influence on the Argentine dance scene in the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, I will analyze some aspects of her *Suite Argentina*. My hypothesis is that with this piece Mercé achieved the goal of the intellectual elite in Buenos Aires, namely to create a choreography of stylized Argentine folkloric dances filtered through the prism of modernity. Thus, this piece functioned as a cohesive representation of identity in a romantic stereotype of the Argentine nation both for the country itself and abroad, where it was widely performed by Mercé and lent legitimacy to local dances.

Keywords: National Identity, Exoticism, Stylized Dance, Folklore.

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ENTRE ESPAÑA Y ARGENTINA: REPRESENTACIONES DE LA IDENTIDAD EN LA BÚSQUEDA DE LA MODERNIDAD²

Resumen

Propongo explorar los vínculos entre España y Argentina en lo que respecta a las representaciones de identidad en las danzas de Antonia Mercé y en la construcción de su figura como artista. Estas conexiones son complejas en lugar de homogéneas y evidencian el proceso de Mercé de exotización de la identidad nacional argentina. En primer lugar, analizaré las ideas de «argentinidad» y «españolidad» en Argentina en ese período, antes de examinar brevemente las influencias de Antonia Mercé en la escena de la danza argentina en la primera mitad del siglo XX. Para concluir, analizaré algunos aspectos de su *Suite Argentina*. Mi hipótesis al respecto es que, a través de esta pieza, Mercé logró el objetivo de la élite intelectual de Buenos Aires: crear una coreografía de danzas folklóricas argentinas estilizadas, filtradas a través del prisma de la modernidad. De este modo, esta obra funcionó como una representación cohesionada de la identidad dentro de un estereotipo romántico de la nación argentina, tanto para el país mismo como en el extranjero, donde Mercé la interpretó ampliamente, otorgando legitimidad a las danzas locales.

Palabras clave: identidad nacional, exotismo, danza estilizada, folclore.

1. INTRODUCTION

Antonia Mercé, «La Argentina». Her stage name has been explained in reference to her birthplace, but what symbolic, economic and political implications, to name but a few, did this epithet have? Why did she choose «Argentina»? The choice of name is sometimes attributed to her mother, but Antonia Mercé could have changed it, and when she debuted in 1902, she actually went by the name «Aida» (Molins 250-261). It was not until six years later, in 1908, that she adopted the nickname «La Argentina». Audiences in the South American country felt identified with the name and her legacy has endured in both Spain and Argentina. Consequently, anecdotal or biographical explanations alone are insufficient; regardless of the original motivation, the name had a multifaceted identificatory and symbolic impact.

² Esta publicación es parte del proyecto de I+D+i *Cuerpo danzante: archivos, imaginarios y transculturalidades en la danza entre el Romanticismo y la Modernidad*, ref. PID2021-122286NB-I00, financiado por MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/ FEDER Una manera de hacer Europa; y del proyecto PICT-2021-I-INVI-00216 *Los ballets argentinos de la primera mitad del siglo XX. Representaciones e imaginarios identitarios nacionales en ámbitos oficiales de la cultura*, financiado por AGENCIA I+D+i, FONCyT.

During my postdoctoral research, I began to investigate the representations of Hispanic identity in Argentine dancers and choreographers³. At that time, I focused on Angelita Vélez and Joaquín Pérez Fernández, in dialogue with the Spanish dancers Argentinita and Pilar López. This work focused on the context of the Perón government in Argentina and the Franco regime in Spain, but in studying Vélez, Pérez Fernández and the López sisters, reference is also made to one of their predecessors, Antonia Mercé, whose career established a dialogue between these two countries. For example, in her biography of Angelita Vélez, Adela García Salaberry (10-11) refers to the figure of Mercé in order to establish a relationship between them and legitimize Vélez. According to García Salaberry, Vélez traveled to Spain to study flamenco on the recommendation of La Argentina. Furthermore, in an interview Vélez gave to the *ABC* (Córdoba 33) during her stay in Madrid, she referred to Mercé as one of «the great dancers», although Vélez placed herself in the lineage of the Argentinita.

Today, this research is being continued within the framework of two research projects⁴. I am interested in exploring the concepts of «Argentine» and «Spanish» in the first half of the twentieth century, their links to state cultural policies, the construction of national identities and the political, ideological and aesthetic implications. Therefore, here I will examine the connections between Spain and Argentina in relation to the representation of identity in Antonia Mercé's dances and in the construction of her figure as an artist. These connections are complex rather than homogeneous and bear witness to Mercé's process of exoticizing Argentine national identity.

The article is based on archival research, mainly comprising newspaper articles, hand programs and photographs, as there are no video documents of Mercé's performances in Buenos Aires. I will first discuss the notions of «Argentineness» and «Spanishness» in Argentina at this time, before briefly discussing Antonia Mercé's influence on the Argentine dance scene in the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, I will analyze selected aspects of her *Suite Argentina*. Central to the investigation is the idea that Antonia Mercé's stage name La Argentina could have been an advertising strategy to exoticize herself, but that, as will be analyzed in this article, it could also have served as an advertisement for Argentina (the country), making this dancer a cultural ambassador. At a time when Argentina wanted to be

³ This paper started as a partial result of my study visit in October 2019 to the Complutense University of Madrid, as part of my post-doctoral research. This study visit was made possible by an international mobility UBAINT grant for teaching staff at the University of Buenos Aires (research topic: «Dialogue between Spain and Argentina in dance in the context of the first Perón regime and the Franco regime: the case of Angelita Vélez, Joaquín Pérez Fernández, Argentinita and Pilar López»; supervisor: Dr. Inmaculada Matía Polo), and by the research project *Ballets Españoles (1927-1929): una compañía de danza para la internacionalización del arte moderno* (P. E. I+D+I Acciones de Dinamización Europa Excelencia, Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, State Research Agency ref. ERC2018-092829).

⁴ On the one hand, it takes part of the research project *Cuerpo danzante: archivos, imaginarios y transculturalidades en la danza entre el Romanticismo y la Modernidad*, led by Dr. Idoia Murga Castro. On the other, conceptually takes part in my research project *Los ballets argentinos de la primera mitad del siglo XX. Representaciones e imaginarios identitarios nacionales en ámbitos oficiales de la cultura*.

perceived as a modern (in the sense of Eurocentric modernity) nation, in which a local imagined community was created to give cohesion to a diverse population, the representation by Antonia Mercé was a great opportunity that her performance *Suite Argentina* and her own name and backstory could achieve.

2. ARGENTINE DANCES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CREATION OF A NATIONAL IDENTITY

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the elite culture of the Buenos Aires oligarchy was intended to position Buenos Aires—and thus Argentina—as the most «modern» nation among Latin American countries. Consequently, the need was seen for a concert dance that was distinct from more popular forms such as the circus or the tango. Thus, dance was constructed as an «art» under the cultural influence of «Eurocentric modernity» (Dussel 69-81), and modern ballet was considered an exemplary representation of this art (Tambutti, *Segundo momento* 81). Within this framework, the existence of dance as a performing art was tied to the European perspective of the Argentine elite, for whom the connection with Europe defined their economic success and cultural inclusion in the world (Tambutti, *El «nosotros» europeo* 2).

Although dance companies—mainly from France and Italy—were already performing in Argentina in the nineteenth century, the historiography of Argentine dance often identifies the year 1913, when the Ballets Russes company performed in Buenos Aires under the direction of impresario Serge Diaghilev, as the probable starting point for a historical account of concert dance in the country and the consolidation of interest in dance. An interest in the performance of local dances also began to develop (Destaville 13-49). The company returned in 1917, and Fernando Emery locates the beginning of «Argentine dance» after this date, in July 1918, when eight Argentine dancers performed the dances of the final act of the opera *Samson and Delilah* (167-172).

However, while modern and universal concert dance was taking root in the country, the same intellectual elites sought to generate a national identity closely linked to folklore⁵. The first precedent for this folklore movement was *criollismo*, a movement that emerged with the publication of *Martín Fierro* in 1872 and reached its peak in the late nineteenth century with the *criollo* circus. By 1910, a group of writers known as the Centenarian Generation was largely responsible for the indigenous thrust of *criollismo*, reinforcing the division of Argentina into the «cold, impersonal Buenos Aires» (the capital city) and the authentic «interior», the *criollo* Argentina (Chamosa 113-142). This cultural dualism implied a moral judgment according to which the supposedly Argentine values degenerated with the increasing Europeanization of Buenos Aires, while the *criollos* of the so-called «deep interior» were supposed to have

⁵ For more on this context, see Cadús (*Danza y peronismo*).

preserved their ancestral, unadulterated values and wisdom. In this vision, the *gaucho* of the pampas emerged as the archetype of national identity (Chamosa 13).

This echoes an imagined concept of nation in the sense proposed by Benedict Anderson as an «an imagined political community, and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign» (25)⁶. In the Argentine folkloric movement, this concept of nation also had a racial and cultural equivalent. As the historian Ezequiel Adamovsky (50-92) explains, Argentine nationality was constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in accordance with two discourses. On the one hand, it was postulated that the era of «racial» conflict, described by figures such as Sarmiento as a contrast between civilization and barbarism, was now over and that the «Argentine race» was a «melting pot» of all, albeit defined as «white and European». It was thus assumed that the Argentine population had no ethnic or racial differences, and that Argentines of other skin color or origin had died out.

The second founding discourse was *criollismo*. As Adamovsky notes, their simultaneous existence generated interferences, for if the Argentine was a white European and the *criollo* gaucho was the embodiment of what it meant to be «Argentine», then this latter should be thought of exclusively as a descendant of the Spaniards. However, the term «*criollo*» came from the previous period and implied biological and cultural mixing.

By canonizing *Martín Fierro* as the great national poem, Leopoldo Lugones resolved the contradiction by postulating that although this mixed «sub-race» had left its fundamental *spiritual* mark on the nation, it had already physically disappeared. Nationalist thinking at the time of the centenary and in the decades that followed (...) generally adopted the same argument, claiming the heritage of the *criollos* as «spirit» («the gaucho», in the singular) and either ignoring contemporary *criollos* altogether or celebrating them from a «Hispanic» perspective that associated them with Spanish heritage and dismissed any contribution from another origin. (Adamovsky 54-55)

This Hispanic privileging limited the possibility of adopting the concept of a «mixed race» nation that was necessary to justify the *criollo* (Chamosa 50). However, Adamovsky notes some exceptions. For example, this idea was challenged during Perón's first term as president and through the cultural policies of the 1940s and 1950s, although this coincided with the Hispanic movement (Cadús, *Danza y peronismo* 129).

This intersection between modernity and *criollismo* led to the so-called «nationalist ballets» in Argentina, which were created in the 1920s and performed until the 1970s. The first ballet to be recognized as nationalist was *La Flor del Irupé* by Constantino Gaito with

⁶ It is imagined because its members will never know all of their compatriots but nevertheless have a mental image of national communion. Nations are imagined as limited because they all have finite boundaries. They are imagined as sovereign because «The gage and emblem of this freedom [that they dream of] is the sovereign State». Lastly, the nation is imagined as a community because despite inequality, it is conceived of as a fraternity, as a horizontal fellowship.

choreography by Boris Romanoff, which premiered at the Colón Theater on 17 July 1929, although a short, nationalist piece with choreography by Bronislava Nijinska, *Cuadro Campestre*⁷, had already been performed in 1926 (Giovannini and Foglia de Ruiz 108). These works contained a symbolic allusion to popular culture in the dances and music, but were stylized, modified and filtered through the prism of «cultured» European music and dance, which could lead to a romantic vision of national culture that portrayed it as quaint and generated stereotypes.

One element that permeated the Romanticism of this period was the «new cultural definition of the nation», which established a direct relationship between a society and its cultural production in order to express a national sentiment (Myers 15-46). Early twentieth-century *criollismo* adopted elements of this European nationalist romanticism, for example by inventing an «imaginary gaucho» who served as an archetype of the «cultural hero» central to the consolidation of the nation-state (Chamosa 37). Similar to early European folklore movement from 1800 to 1830, the proto-ethnographic task of collecting legends, songs and dances served to construct and document evidence of the existence of an atavistic national consciousness that was preserved in the oral traditions of the «people».

In both cases —the national epic and popular folklore— the intention was to demonstrate a correspondence between nation and people: between a consciousness of national identity and a consciousness of popular identity, which were seen as interchangeable and which could serve to underpin claims to a State of their own. (Myers 36)

3. ANTONIA MERCÉ LA ARGENTINA AND HER CONNECTION WITH «ARGENTINENESS»

Numerous Spanish artists performed in Buenos Aires within the social and cultural context described above. Antonia Mercé danced there on five occasions, the first time in 1915 as the «Queen of Castanets». On this occasion, she performed alongside Caralt's company. While the latter was not very well received, La Argentina and her dances were. She received praise from the press and gained many followers during her performances (Manso, *La Argentina* 85). At the same time, she also performed at charity events at the Colón Theater. Although she had already gained an international reputation, according to an interview published in *El Diario*, she confessed that she felt «more nervous than ever because this audience was made up of “her people”»⁸ (qtd. in Manso, *La Argentina* 76). As this quote suggests, Mercé identified with her birthplace and her reception there helped to create the idea of a mixed-race identity that conferred the dancer legitimacy and empathy. Further evidence of this is, for example, the following report from the *Diario Español de Buenos Aires* entitled «The Latin American dancer»:

⁷ For an analysis of *Cuadro Campestre* see Cadús («Confusions and translations»).

⁸ Original quote in Spanish: «por ser este público el “suyo” siente ante él más temor que ante cualquier otro».

To the Spaniards she appears Spanish, to the Argentines she comes from Buenos Aires; for like the alternating flashes of a rotating lighthouse, her gestures, facial expressions and movements, not to mention her conversation and demeanor, alternately reflect the fiery, vehement passion of the Andalusian gypsy and the heady, luxuriant sweetness of a pretty *china* [the female equivalent of the *gaucho*] Antonia Mercé is a Hispano-Argentine artist⁹. (90)

The quote deployed stereotypical identities of both nations to construct a dual national identity with «Latino» roots for Mercé. On the one hand, it referred to Spain, particularly Andalusia, and described her as a «fiery» [*fogoso*] nature, the romantic stereotype of Spanish identity. On the other hand, she was portrayed as having a kind nature («the heady sweetness» [*la dulzura embriagadora*]) and at the same time sensual («luxuriant» [*lujuriente*]), and allusions were made to the Pampas in the mention of a «pretty *china*» [*la china linda*] and to the «interior» of the country, where the idealized village representative of «Argentineness» was located. In this case, it was not to an «imaginary gaucho» but about an «imaginary *china*» and an equally «imaginary» gypsy woman. The exotic idea of Argentineness and Spanishness as a form of romantic escape was used as a legitimizing stereotype in the artist's appearance, while pointing out about the intricate link between national identity as an imagined community and dance.

Her second appearance in Buenos Aires took place in 1919, this time as part of the last act of the theater group led by Lola Membrives and Rogelio Juárez. Later, in 1933, she returned and was contracted by the Colón Theater to give solo performances and stage her version of *Amor Brujo* with the theater's in-house dance company. It was during this season that she achieved her definitive success in the country, probably due to the Colón Theater's endorsement. She also established her dance style at this time. For example, various newspaper reviews and interviews highlighted her idea of «stylizing» the dances, her links with the Ballets Russes and her ethnographic work. This also legitimized her art in relation to the Colón Theater and its dance tradition, whose in-house dance company was directed by Nijinska at the time. Furthermore, the idea of stylizing folk dances was a harbinger of the thinking that would drive the creation of the aforementioned Argentine nationalist ballets a few years later. The climate at the time thus favored the construction of a notion of «Argentineanness» through allusions to Hispanic roots.

In 1934, Mercé returned to the Colón Theater for a second season, although on this occasion she also performed at other theaters in the city. It was then that, before continuing her tour, she collected information about Argentine folk dances. The Buenos Aires magazine *El Hogar* organized a performance of Argentine folklore for Mercé in her room at the Plaza Hotel and said: «What belongs to us belongs to you; this is the music you should pack in your suitcases, these are the motifs of your soul that you should purify and take with you on your

⁹ «A los españoles les parece española, a los argentinos, porteña; porque alternativamente, como los destellos bicolores de un faro giratorio, se reflejan, en sus gestos, en sus ademanes y movimientos, y no hay que decir en su conversación y en su semblante, la cálida fogosidad rotunda de la gitana andaluza y la dulzura embriagadora y lujuriente de la china linda... Antonia Mercé es una artista hispano-argentina».

travels»¹⁰ (qtd. in Manso, *La Argentina* 361). These words not only reflect Mercé's identification with Argentina, but also reveal a function of this affiliation: the legitimization of Argentine dances by this artist and her style.

Here, the journalists demonstrated their knowledge of Mercé's idea of «purifying» and «stylizing» folk dances¹¹, and attempted to use this choreographic strategy to insert local dances into the repertoire of the time. This probably echoes the idea mentioned earlier: that Argentina declared itself a modern nation, and one characteristic of this was the «fusion», as Mercé called it, of a reduction of popular forms and a preference for modernity. These ideas now served not only to import a «cultivated» form of dance, but also to export Argentine dances abroad, which could lead to the depiction of an Argentina «that was more Argentine than the real Argentina for many educated people», including Argentines —to use Mercé's words (Murga Castro 142)¹².

During Mercé's appearances in Buenos Aires, local press consistently offered shifting interpretations of her identity. For instance, in 1928 she was reported as saying: «I am Spanish, born in Buenos Aires... by chance I was born in the capital of Argentina. Pure Spanish blood runs through my veins»¹³ (qtd. in Manso, *La Argentina* 185). The journalist then added: «She makes too much of being Spanishness... Her name is the best advertisement for the nation that has given her theatrical citizenship: La Argentina»¹⁴ (186). In this case, Mercé was trying to emphasize her Spanish identity and distance herself from her stage name and its connotations in the Argentine capital. It is worth noting that these statements were made in the period between her second and third visit, that is, before her first performance at the Colón Theater. Her strategy for gaining legitimacy at the time was probably to emphasize that she was «Spanish», because, as already mentioned, it was at this time that she established her dance style, which was associated with this stylization of Spanish folk dances. «Spanish» in this context was, in the words of the journalist, her promotional «advertisement» for Spain and for Mercé herself. Despite her remarks, however, the journalist implied that her stage name functioned as an advertisement for Argentina, an idea I will return to when I analyze *Suite Argentina*.

On many other occasions, Mercé referred to Argentina as her «second love» and «beloved homeland» or called herself «perfectly Argentine» and even *porteña* —as people from Buenos Aires are popularly known—. The Spanish imaginary that she created was thus

¹⁰ «Esto es lo suyo, lo nuestro; esta música es la que queremos que guarde en sus maletas, y estos motivos en su alma, para que usted los purifique y los lleve en sus andanzas».

¹¹ On this question, see Murga Castro (*Escenografía*).

¹² Mercé's actual words were: «que para muchísima gente culta, incluidos españoles, es “más España” que la España de veras» [«that for many educated people, including Spaniards, is “more Spanish” than the real Spain»].

¹³ «Soy española nacida en Buenos Aires [...] por un accidente nací en la capital argentina. Corre por mis venas pura sangre española».

¹⁴ «Recalca demasiado su españolismo. [...] Su nombre es el mejor “affiche” [sic] de propaganda para la nación que le ha otorgado ciudadanía teatral: La Argentina».

closely linked to the Argentine one. In this sense, the idea of the magazine *El Hogar* could be seen as the practical realization of what a journalist from the magazine *Caras y Caretas*, Juan José de Soiza Reilly, wrote to this effect: «[...] Antonia Mercé, whose stage name —given to her by her parents— is “La Argentina”, is a far more effective diplomat for our country than a hundred ambassadors in top hats and tails»¹⁵ (qtd. in Manso, *La Argentina* 251). In other words, her stage name also served as an advertisement for the Argentine nation.

In the demonstration of criollo dances and music given for Mercé, the dancers were María Luisa Garrido de Pinto, María Delia Soria Macías de Campos, Lugones Carol, Pancho Cárdenas, Audelina Vieyra and Manuel Gómez Carrillo. «And at the feet of La Argentina, before those who had so often unfurled the capes of their bullfighting tradition, this genuine criollo group spread out the symbolic poncho of their own tradition»¹⁶ (qtd. in Manso, *La Argentina* 361), enthused Francisco Cárdenas in *El Hogar*. The Argentine artists sang *vidalas* and *huainos* and danced the *Palito*, the *Cuándo*, the *Condición*, the *Zamba*, the *Bailecito* and the *Firmeza* under the watchful eye of Mercé, who then repeated them.

Cárdenas said the following about this event, in which national identities were interwoven in the dances:

This dancing genius, who was born an «Argentine» but grew up a «Spanish» will bring the dances of *her land* to all the stages of the world as part of her *pure* art, and her repertoire, thus enriched, will be the living symbol of the *brotherhood of two flags* [the emphasis is mine]. We saw her depart, and as the train pulled away, she waved her handkerchief in an endless *zamba* farewell... In her heart she carried the last notes of a *Firmeza* and in her soul the nostalgia of a *Cuando*¹⁷. (qtd. in Manso, *La Argentina* 361)

The following year, Mercé premiered her *Suite Argentina*, which was based on this experience, first in Paris and then at the Colón Theater. According to dance historian Carlos Manso, after this last performance and that of *Argentinita* in the same year (1935), Buenos Aires became a center for schools dedicated to teaching Spanish dances («Cuatro décadas» 72).

4. SUITE ARGENTINA

In 1935, Antonia Mercé performed a new piece at the Colón Theater entitled *Suite Argentina*, which was inspired by some of the Argentine folk dances she had been shown and taught the

¹⁵ «Antonia Mercé, cuyo sobrenombre de Argentina—apodo que le dieron sus padres—ha hecho en beneficio de nuestro país más diplomacia que cien embajadores vestidos de frac y galera de felpa».

¹⁶ «Y a los pies de Argentina, ante los que tantas veces se tendieron los capotes de su raza torera, este grupo genuinamente criollo, extendió el simbólico poncho de su tradición».

¹⁷ «Ahora, este genio de la danza, que nació “argentina” y vivió “española”, llevará por todos los escenarios del mundo en su arte purísimo los bailes de su tierra, y su repertorio así enriquecido será el símbolo viviente de la hermandad de dos banderas [el subrayado me pertenece]. La hemos visto partir, y al alejarse el tren agitar su pañuelo en un inacabable adiós de zamba [...] Es que llevaba en el corazón las últimas notas de una *Firmeza*, y en el alma las nostalgias de un *Cuando*».

year before. The *Suite Argentina* included the *Condición*¹⁸, *Bailecito*¹⁹ and *Zamba*²⁰, three dances from the Argentine Northwest that use a handkerchief as a central element in their choreographies. Despite the unifying element of the handkerchief, these three dances are very different in nature and origin, and I would even venture to say that they represent different social classes. The exotic idea of Argentineness, which was used as a legitimizing stereotype in Mercé's life story, was now transformed into choreography and reinforced in this piece. It also served as a window to Argentine folklore for the whole world.

In the archive photos of this piece²¹, Mercé can be seen dancing alone, although all these dances are intended for couples, a modification she also made for the Filipino dance, the *Cariñosa*. The photos show her on stage against a dark background with no backdrop and show her turning, extending one arm while tilting her head slightly and twirling her skirt flamenco-style, although none of these dances involve this skirt movement. She appears lively, cheerful and even mischievous as she subtly moves her hips while placing one foot in front of the other in what could be a *Zamba* step. In all four images, she is waving a handkerchief with her right arm while her left arm holds her skirt up to her waist.

On the other hand, the studio photos always show her posing with a white handkerchief in her hand. Some allude to the dance: a preparatory or final pose—in a *tendu devant*—or with her feet together, her body leaning slightly forward, her right arm raised and her chin down, as if she were dancing with a partner. Others simply show her in a pose, seated and mischievous, her left arm crossed under the right arm holding the handkerchief, showing her skirt and flounces, or leaning against a white block. All these images combine elements associated with Argentine folk dances and others that are not, such as the movement of the skirt, which is more reminiscent of Spanish dance. The most striking aspects are their costume, which I will come back to later, and her transformation from couple dances to solo performances, linked by the element of «handkerchief» despite the different performance characteristics of these dances. In this respect, it seems to be more of an allusion to Argentine folk dances, as other modern dancers of the time, such as Ruth Saint Denis, did with other folkloric dances.

This idea becomes clear in the following two excerpts from newspaper reviews, which were selected as examples because numerous reviews referred to the same thing:

¹⁸ This handkerchief dance originated in the Argentine Northwest province of Catamarca. It is a stately courtship dance with slow, sedate, decorous movements, where the couple stand apart in the open position.

¹⁹ This dance originated in Peru and Bolivia. In Argentina, it is characteristic of the Northwest region. It is a *criollo* dance, the product of colonial and indigenous *mestizaje*. The couple stand apart in open position, constantly moving a handkerchief except in the «aura». The dance is animated and suggestive.

²⁰ This is a typical dance of the Argentine Northwest, derived from the *zamacueca*. It is a lively courtship dance with agile, seductive movements, in which the couple stand apart in open position, waving a handkerchief.

²¹ Some of these photographs have been published in Manso (*La Argentina*) and others are held in the Fundación Juan March archives and can be accessed online.

She has soaked them [the dances], filtered them and now serves us the finest, most exquisite extracts²². (qtd. in Manso, *La Argentina* 411)

She seems more Argentine than ever, and as she traced the syncopated steps of a *zamba*, I saw her transform, condensing all the *criolla* intent of my race in her gaze and the immensity of our pampas in the velvety green of her half-closed eyes²³. (399)

The reviews refer not only to Mercé's stylization of the Argentine dances («filtered them» [*los ha filtrado*]), but also to her refinements («the most exquisite of extracts» [*el más exquisito de sus extractos*]). The second description alludes romantically to the *pampas* (although all three dances originated in the Northwest region and the Andes), the stereotype of the «interior» longed for by the *criollismo* movement and the home of the «imaginary gaucho» who represented «Argentineness». In this respect, both the nationalist ballets and the stylizations in the *Suite Argentina* contained a symbolic allusion to popular culture, but filtered through the prism of modernity, creating a romantic vision of national culture and making it picturesque and stereotypical.

Although Mercé rejected Spanish stereotypes (Murga Castro 142), this choreography aligns more closely with the exoticizing tendencies of other modern dancers of her time than to an ethnographic or proto-ethnographic study of local folklore. This can be seen in the synthesis of three very different dances into a «soloist» format. Thus the *Suite Argentina* was an evocation of «everything Argentine». This coincided with Mercé's idea of creating dances in the style of the Ballets Russes, a company whose trademark was modernism and an expression that alluded to an often exotically tinged nationalism, presenting ballets such as *The Firebird* that drew on elements of a picturesque imaginary past and used imagery that evoked the spirit of ancient Russia (Tambutti, *Segundo momento* 90). According to dance researcher Susana Tambutti (*Segundo momento* 81), exoticism also served as a form of escapism in the context of modernism, for which a distant place beyond time and space was essential. The dances in the *Suite Argentina* are an example of this.

These ideas fell within the context of *criollismo*, the Argentine folklore movement and the proposals for romantic stylizations embodied in the nationalist ballets often choreographed by former members of the Ballets Russes or its offshoot companies. Furthermore, Mercé and her *Suite Argentina* may also have served to reinforce the ideas of Hispanic heritage proposed by folklorists of the time.

In this context, it is interesting to analyze the costumes designed by Rodolfo Franco. Rosa Álvarez Olmos reports that during the 1934 demonstration, Audelina Vieyra showed

²² «Los ha hecho macerar [a los bailes], los ha filtrado y nos sirve ahora el más fino, el más exquisito de los extractos».

²³ «La he visto más argentina que nunca, y al dibujar los pacitos sincopados de una zamba la he visto transfigurarse poniendo en su mirada toda la intención criolla de mi raza, y en el terciopelo verde de sus ojos entornados la inmensidad de nuestra pampa».

Mercé a traditional red costume that had been copied from one preserved in the Historical Museum and drew it for her. Mercé then announced: «I will make a costume with red polka dots»²⁴ (qtd. in Manso, *La Argentina* 363). And if she had chosen this costume, one could tell a story in which the red polka dots could open up a different interpretation of the costume's meaning. For example, one could say that the dress contains an allusion to Argentine African heritage, because the stereotypical polka dots and the color red could refer to the images of the itinerant Argentine food vendors known as *mazamorreras* —itinerant Afro-Argentine women who sold *mazamorra*²⁵ during the colonial period—.

But Mercé's idea of wearing a dress with red dots was not realized. As can be seen on the costume preserved in the Instituto Nacional de Estudios del Teatro [National Institute of Theater Studies] (Figs. 1, 2 and 3), Franco designed a costume in white and blue (white dress with blue polka dots, blue shoes, blue scarf) and a brown shawl with golden details reminiscent of the colors of the Argentine flag (light blue, white and a golden sun). In this sense, she would have performed Argentine identity as a hybrid culture of «Spanishness» and «Argentineness».



Figs. 1, 2 and 3. Photographs of the costume of the *Suite Argentina*, which is kept at the Instituto Nacional de Estudios del Teatro (INET). INET 150107. The photos were taken by the author. Courtesy of the INET.

As seen in the studio photos described above and, in these figures, the costume is a mixture of a traditional *criollo* dress and a flamenco dress. The design could allude to a mixture of a formal costume for the *Condición* dance and a *criollo* costume for the *Zamba* dance, but not for the *Bailecito*, which requires a simple costume without high heels, more characteristic of the popular classes in the northwest. However, it could also be a Spanish costume, as the polka dots and the many flounces are atypical of Argentine folk costume, as is the handkerchief worn over the shoulders like a shawl. As with the skirt movement described above, the supposedly Argentine dance in combination with this costume creates a superimposed effect that turns

²⁴ «Me voy a hacer un traje con los lunares rojos».

²⁵ *Mazamorra* is a traditional Argentine dessert of indigenous origin made of white maize, water, sugar and vanilla.

Mercé's body —La Argentina— into a collage of Argentine and Spanish folk dances and identities.

One could therefore say that Mercé's *Suite Argentina* achieved what the intellectual elite of Buenos Aires, who brought the Ballets Russes to the Colón Theater, had wanted: to create a piece in which the stylization of Argentine dances represented the nation through a coherent romantic stereotype and presented Argentina to the outside world in a purified, refined, elevated and united way, legitimized by a modern European artist. In this way, the idea of Argentina as a «mixed-race» nation, *criolla* and white, was emphasized.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This article examines the complex relationship between Spain and Argentina through the representation of identity in the dances of Antonia Mercé «La Argentina» and the construction of her personality as an artist. The central hypothesis proposed is that with her piece *Suite Argentina*, Mercé achieved the goal of the intellectual elite of Buenos Aires: to create a choreography of stylized Argentine folk dances filtered through the prism of modernity. In this way, the work functioned as a cohesive representation of Argentine national identity within a romantic stereotype, both at home and abroad, legitimizing the local dances. In this sense, the article opens a further discussion on the ambivalent tensions surrounding the concept of modernity.

The article explores different types of modernity, especially in the context of dance and the construction of national identity in Argentina at the beginning of the 20th century, with Antonia Mercé as a central figure. Firstly, there is a Eurocentric modernity as a cultural influence on the cultural elite of the Buenos Aires oligarchy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which sought to position Buenos Aires (and Argentina) as the most «modern» nation among Latin American countries. Modern dance and ballet served this purpose, i.e. (secondly) modernism in dance. This modernism often manifested itself in a nationalism with exotic and primitivist traits. Thirdly, the article points out that there is an idea of modernization and the creation of a national identity through stylized dance and the institutionalization of local folklore: Antonia Mercé's *Suite Argentina* is presented as a piece that achieved this goal. The figure of Antonia Mercé as a «modern European artist» legitimized local Argentine dances and helped to present Argentina to the outside world in a «purified, refined, elevated and unified» way.

The *Suite Argentina*, premiered in 1935, was inspired by Argentine folk dances such as the Condición, the Bailecito and the Zamba. This piece was in line with Mercé's idea of creating dances in the style of the Ballets Russes, which were characterized by modernism and an exotic touch of nationalism and often served as a form of escapism. A key feature of this piece, which can be seen as a modern abstraction or gesture (also echoing other modern solo dancers of the time), was the transformation of couple dances into solos. Her costumes and

movements combined criollo and flamenco elements, creating a «collage» of Argentine and Spanish identities. Contemporary reviews emphasized Mercé's stylization and sophistication and romantically alluded to the Pampas, even though the dances originated in the northwest of Argentina, reinforcing the stereotype of the «imaginary gaucho». In summary, the figure of Antonia Mercé and her piece *Suite Argentina* reveal the complex connections between the representations of Spanish and Argentine identity and the idea of creating modern dances. This process of exoticizing Argentine national identity was in line with the thinking of Argentine intellectuals of the time (whether representatives of the folklore movement or those who looked to Paris and decided to invite the Ballets Russes to create a local ballet), who all agreed on ideas of modernization and the creation of a national *criollo* identity.

These notions of Criollo and Hispanic identities, which exoticize both origins and gain legitimacy through these references to an imaginary identity, are also found in Argentinita and her piece *El Gaucho* (see Cadús «Dragging identidades») and in Pilar López, who maintains this heritage through the *Suite Argentina*. In the case of the Argentine dancers Angelita Vélez, Joaquín Pérez Fernández and even, as suggested by Olga Fernández Latour de Botas (323-369), the prima ballerina of the Colón Theater, María Ruanova, the idea of Spanish identity provided legitimacy for a notion of the Hispanic race that was linked to spirituality. This essentialist, romantic notion of identity was in line with the postulates of the *criollo* movement. Thus, these dancers incorporated Spanish dances into their repertoires and biographies as part of Latin American folklore, even though only Vélez and Ruanova had Spanish ancestry and Pérez Fernández was nine months old when his parents took him to Argentina. However, these conversations will be the subject of future research.

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