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Malambo, Tradition and Memory

in Argentina. The Body as an Archive in *La Era del Cuero*

Malambo, Tradição e Memória

na heterogeneidade dos tempos históricos da Argentina. O Corpo como Arquivo em *La Era del Cuero*

RESUMO

O malambo foi historicamente construído na Argentina como uma dança representativa do ser nacional e, atualmente, observa-se certa disputa entre inovação e tradição em torno dessa dança. Uma ideia de tradição que supõe uma certa “fidelidade” à forma como o malambo era dançado em sua origem, o que leva à seguinte pergunta: é possível reproduzir aquele malambo do passado de forma idêntica? E ele ainda seria o mesmo se se desviasse de certos parâmetros tradicionais? Este artigo propõe analisar a relação entre dança, tradição e história a partir da obra *La Era del Cuero*, de Pablo Rotemberg, estreada em 2022. Por meio da incorporação do malambo e, conseqüentemente, da figura do gaúcho, a obra permite refletir e repensar os vínculos entre arquivo e memória na encenação desses corpos. Esses corpos encarnam as tensões e negociações de um passado que surge no presente e que permite pensar um tempo heterogêneo no qual passado, presente e futuro convivem em um mesmo tempo cênico. A pergunta fundamental que orienta este trabalho é: que representações e que reminiscências dessa dança do passado podem ser vistas encarnadas nos corpos dos/as bailarinos/as?

Palavras-chave: Malambo, Arquivo, História, Memória, Nação

ABSTRACT

The Malambo has been historically constructed in Argentina as a dance representative of the national being, and currently there is a certain dispute between innovation and tradition around this dance. An idea of tradition that presupposes a certain ‘fidelity’ to the way the Malambo was danced in its origins, and that leads to the question: is it possible to produce this Malambo of the past in an identical way, and is it possible to do so when it deviates from certain traditional parameters? This article proposes to analyse the relationship between dance, tradition and history through the work *La Era del Cuero* by Pablo Rotemberg, premiered in 2022. By incorporating the malambo and, consequently, the figure of the gaucho, the work allows us to reflect and rethink the links between archive and memory in the staging of these bodies. These bodies embody the tensions and negotiations of a past that appears in the present, allowing us to think of a heterogeneous time in which past, present and future coexist in the same scenic time. The fundamental question that guides this work is What representations and memories of this dance of the past can be seen embodied in the bodies of the dancers?

Key words: Malambo, Archive, History, Memory, Nation

Introduction¹

In recent years, the malambo - the emblematic dance of the Argentinean nation and representative of the gaucho figure - has regained centrality. This is largely linked to the proliferation of companies that export or sell the malambo abroad, which generates resistance in more traditionalist sectors. Thus, understanding malambo from an essentialist perspective, a kind of opposition between the traditional and the commercial appears on the scene. A romantic vision underlies here, according to which the malambo dancer should recover the 'authentic' way of dancing of the gaucho of the past, preserving a certain fidelity to that earlier time. At this point, it is worth asking: What would this faithful-to-the-past malambo be? Is it possible to reproduce it identically? Does it cease to be malambo if it is not framed within certain traditional parameters?

The malambo is, without a doubt, one of the most representative dances of Argentina, not only because of its spectacular nature, but also because it has been historically consolidated as such. It is a 'zapateo' -rhythmic beats with the feet- performed by one or more dancers showing dexterity, speed and coordination accompanied by a bass drum and/or guitar. This dance is structured on the basis of 'mudanzas', i.e. sequences of rapid foot movements that combine stomping, turns and displacements. According to Vega (1936), in the past, the malambo fulfilled a social function linked to competition between rural workers, motivated by honour, desire to play or recognition. Those who performed it sought to demonstrate their skill by means of complex combinations without repetition, thus demonstrating their physical endurance.

This dance was part of the so-called criollo duel, which also included the 'payada' and the confrontation with knives as ways of settling conflicts. The gaucho, as that characteristic and emblematic character of the Argentine nation,

¹ This research is part of the Oriented Scientific and Technological Research Project (PCTO) directed by Dr. María Eugenia Cadús. It is entitled '*Historiographies in movement. Archive, recreation and new methodologies to approach the history of Argentine dance*'.

and the dance that represents him - the malambo -, is a subject traversed by contradictions and negotiations between the popular sectors and the economic and political elites. Its construction as a symbol of modern national identity finds its foundational myth in José Hernández's² *Martin Fierro*, a key work for understanding the values and attributes assigned to this subject and how they changed. In general terms, this figure comes from the rural worker who was in charge of looking after the cattle in specific regions of Argentina, characterised by a life marked by a feeling of freedom, living in remote areas and expelled by the colonial authority. However, despite being a characteristic figure of a particular region, he is universalised as an emblem of an entire community, of a nation. A process that involved multiple conflicts and negotiations between the popular sectors and the elites to define which values he would represent.

With this in mind, the aim of this article is to analyse the imbrications between tradition, history and dance based on the work *La Era del Cuero* by Pablo Rotemberg³. Premiered at the Teatro General San Martín⁴ in 2022, re-

² José Hernández (1834-1886) was an Argentine poet, journalist, military man, politician and author of *Martin Fierro*.

³ Argentine director, choreographer, dancer, musician and teacher recognised in the production of contemporary dance mainly in Buenos Aires City. He is considered a key figure in the Buenos Aires dance scene, especially in contemporary dance, and his work has been shown in theaters and festivals in Argentina and abroad. He explores different dance languages by incorporating elements from other disciplines such as the audiovisual field. His pieces usually deal with different themes, often focusing on the body and frequently addressing violence. Rotemberg is known for works such as *La Wagner* (2013), *La idea fija* (2010), *Savage* (2018), among others. He had previously presented plays at the Complejo Teatral de Buenos Aires, which includes the Teatro General San Martín. For example, he presented *Tango Alemán y El Cisne Salvaje*.

⁴ The General San Martín Theater was inaugurated in 1960 as a continuation of the former Municipal Theater of the City of Buenos Aires. It is currently part of the Complejo Teatral de Buenos Aires, which consists of six theaters in different parts of the city and is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture of Buenos Aires. The building is situated on Avenida Corrientes, a renowned thoroughfare within the local theater district, in close proximity to the Obelisk. It houses three performance spaces in a building of more than ten floors, in addition to workshops dedicated to set and costume design, rehearsal rooms, administrative offices and other facilities. It also houses the Contemporary Dance Workshop, one of Argentina's best-known public training centers, which is free, admits students on an audition basis and offers a three-year program. Within the same building operates the theater's stable contemporary dance troupe, created in 1968 as Ballet del Teatro San Martín and recreated in 1977 after a brief interruption under the name Ballet Contemporáneo del Teatro Municipal General San Martín (del Mármol, Magri and Sáez, 2011). This official company was created in the context of local activities in the field of modern dance, as a space for the esthetic and corporal exploration and visualization of these works. Throughout its history, under the direction of prominent choreographers from the Argentine scene and with the participation of numerous artists who have joined it, the company has established itself as a benchmark for modern and contemporary dance in the country, with national and international appeal. For a more detailed description of its history and development, see Isse Moyano (2015); del Mármol, Magri and Sáez (2011); Durante (2008).

released in 2023 and performed in 2024⁵. This work problematises the historical construction of the nation, as well as the idea of tradition and its imbrications. In this framework, through the incorporation of the malambo, the figure of the gaucho appears, as both constituent elements of Argentine identity. *La Era del Cuero* raises the possibility of thinking about the construction - or reconstruction - of a national identity that may or may not have existed through Argentine folk dances, with an emphasis on the malambo.

The interesting thing about this artistic proposal is that history is not presented as a linear continuum, but as a framework where past, present and future dialogue in the same scenic time. In this way, the work does not think of history in a teleological way, which would imply a process of epistemic violence, in which the dominant narratives (Cadús, 2019) eliminate all those 'othernesses' that make certain sectors feel uncomfortable or threatened. In the words of Barba (2018, p. 403): 'thinking of history as a single linear progression with a past that is gone, a present that is singular, and a future to which we are all heading'. In this sense, history must be thought of as something fragmented, whose times are not linear, but heterogeneous, as Benjamin (1996) argues. Thus, it must be critically analysed and understood as a dynamic process, in constant transformation, where the past appears in the present, and it is impossible to leave it behind.

In this materiality of history, bodies appear as spaces where historical processes of struggle are embodied, places in which a shared history is inscribed. In this sense, the body can be thought of in different ways, even as an archive (Lepecki, 2010). From the title itself, the work poses a reflection on the relationship between leather and the body (de la Puente, unpublished), an

⁵ The work was restaged at Centro Cultural 25 de mayo in 2023 and was presented at the same venue in October 2024 in the framework of the Festival Internacional de Buenos Aires (FIBA). In addition, in 2024, a fragment of the work was presented to programmers at the Argentina Girart performing arts and music market. Direction and choreography: Pablo Rotemberg; Performers and choreography: Alejandro "Baby Cata" Desanti, Maximiliano Díaz, Carla Di Grazia, Nickytuns, Marcos Olivera, Ezequiel Posse, Facundo Posse y Carla Rímola; Original music and sound design: Axel Krygier; Music by Alberto Ginastera, Carlos Guastavino, Christyne Chartrand; Dramaturge: Eugenia Cadús; Video production and design: Lucio Bazzalo; Lighting design: Fernando Berreta; Costume design: Endi Ruiz; Set design: Cecilia Zuvialde; Direction assistance: Candela Mosquera y Ana Pellegrini.

almost playful relationship, as a single letter separates them in the original language, but at the same time connects them⁶. This symbolic distinction widens when we question what the dancers' bodies represent: what reminiscences of the dance of the past are embodied in them? Not in the sense of 'pure' forms, that is, of recovering the true form in which those gauchos danced, but in the sense of observing the tensions and hybridisations that are embodied in the dancers' 'bodily memories'.

It is crucial to understand the body as something collective, in its relationship with others, with tradition, with the nation, with collective history, etc. In a discipline in which bodies are constitutive, it is essential to observe how they are presented on stage, how these bodily memories are activated and how the aforementioned historical processes are embodied. In *La Era del Cuero*, this link between memory, body and history manifests itself in various ways, particularly through the uncovering of the violence inherent in the process of building a common nation. This violence is directly enacted on the bodies and is made explicit, for example, in the moments when the dancers hit each other or when the riding crop is used.

The hypothesis guiding this work is that the incorporation of the malambo through these living bodies brings into play the history of the nation and its shared symbols, which are usually presented as static or as closed and immutable systems. In these bodies that dance and '*malambean*'⁷, a bodily memory is at stake, a manifestation of the past through this dance. In this way, the work problematises and critically reflects on this past that erupts time and time again, from which it is possible to think about the present, but also about the identity and the nation we wish to build in the future. As Maurice Halbwachs (2004) points out, 'Alongside written history, there is a living history that perpetuates and renews itself over time' (P. 66). In relation to this, one of the

⁶ In Spanish body can be translated as '*cuero*' while leather is translated as '*cuero*', which is the reason for this relationship, as in Spanish only one letter distinguishes one word from the other.

⁷ A verb derived from the noun malambo, simply meaning 'to dance the malambo' -that is, to perform this dance.

dancers in the work, Maximiliano Díaz, says in an interview: 'folklore is alive' (Bertolini, 2022). This statement opens up the possibility of a reflection that does not consider folklore as a mere compilation of traditions from the past that die there, but as a past that is renegotiated in the present. This can also be transferred to reflect on dance archives and how they have been constructed throughout history.

At this point it is important to note that memory should not only be understood in its individual dimension, but also in its collective dimension, following Halbwachs' (2004) concept. Memory as social, despite its possible shortcomings, is of crucial value in asking what a society remembers of its past and how these memories are transformed over time. Halbwachs also sees forgetting as part of collective memory, understanding that what is not remembered or what is excluded has both social and cultural weight. In other words, memory is selective, full of 'gaps' and not always entirely 'reliable', but it forms a fundamental part of the foundations of a society's social and cultural history. While history should try to recover those forgotten memories, it often chooses paths in which the others, in terms of otherness, are forgotten, silenced and hidden.

In this sense, some questions that guide this research are: What popular memories inhabit the figure of the gaucho represented in the work and how much do they nourish it? How does this relate to the idea of tradition and nation? How is this past embodied in the bodies of the dancers? Is there a possible relationship between body and archive? Finally, how does *La Era del Cuero* bring past, present and future into dialogue? In an attempt to answer these questions, this article is structured in two sections. The first section analyses in general terms the relationship between the topics of the gaucho, tradition and the myth of the nation through the representations that appear in *La Era del Cuero*. The second examines the relationship between body, memory and history, focusing on the incorporation of the malambo in the work. Methodologically, the analysis is based on my own experience as a spectator,

complemented by the Teatro San Martín's official footage and informal conversations with actors who participated in the production. It should be clarified that in both sections the play is considered in a global way, that is to say, without following a chronological or linear order of the acts, but prioritising the themes directly linked to the questions and hypotheses that guide this research.

The gaucho, tradition and the myth of the nation in a new Era

The Pampean plain, with its vast extension and its symbolism deeply rooted in Argentine history, is configured as a territory of multiple meanings: place of origin of the gaucho, space of battles, frontier, economic engine of the country, among others. Throughout history, this landscape has been constructed as an apparently homogeneous space, which becomes a key stage in *La Era del Cuero*. In the work, the dancers find themselves in a post-apocalyptic future, situated in a wasteland that could refer to the Pampas plains, but which, at the same time, acquires a symbolic charge that interrogates and puts in tension the notions of nation and identity.

The work is structured in an overture, three acts - Act I: 'El día después'⁸, Act II: 'Luz mala'⁹ and Act III: 'No future' - and two intermissions. In it, eight dancers - 'two contemporary dancers and six folk dancers'¹⁰ - narrate the story of the construction or reconstruction of a nation that might have existed or that, perhaps, never existed. However, the distinction of the performers according to the type of dance they practice, as it appears in the programme, is problematic. This is problematic primarily because it somewhat confines the dancers to fixed

⁸ It can be translated as 'the day after'.

⁹ The 'bad light' is a legend within the folkloric archive that describes a mysterious light that appears floating near the ground in rural areas at night. According to popular belief, this light may signal the location of buried bones, hidden treasures or even be related to spiritual presences, which generates fear among those who see it. However, there is another explanation in which this phenomenon may be produced by the combustion of gases that are released when organic remains, such as animal or human bones, decompose. On contact with air, these gases can produce a faint glow, creating the illusion of a floating light.

¹⁰ The quotation marks correspond to the text of the summary in the programme.

categories, which the work itself seeks to dismantle by encouraging all dancers to explore different dance techniques. In turn, this is also reflected in the personal trajectories, crossed by multiple training and knowledge of different techniques and styles.

The dancers emerge in this wasteland like some kind of monsters or zombies, which is reflected in their hunched and ungainly movements, evoking figures that are somewhere between the living and the dead. In this sense, the work resonates with the Gramscian idea that the old never quite dies and the new is never quite born¹¹. This ambiguity is also materialised in the costumes, fundamentally in the scenes that appear in tight-fitting red overalls whose design imitates the bony structure of the torso and legs, highlighting the muscles and bones. These costumes, on the one hand, might give the impression of being made of flesh; on the other, they might suggest that the dancers were or have been stripped of their own skin. This visual play refers to the leather that appears in the title of the work, which evokes multiple symbolic meanings, from the animal and the rural to the human¹². It is a fundamental material in the Pampean plains and one that has great weight, especially in traditional Argentinean culture, as it has been used for clothing, musical instruments and objects used in the countryside.

Throughout the work, there is a constant counterpoint between elements that resonate with Argentinean culture and others that could be considered alien or foreign. There are several examples that illustrate this point, one of them relating to dance and the incorporation of techniques other than folkloric dances

¹¹ Understanding that Gramsci (2011) puts it in a different context, the work resonates with this idea of the monstrous and the struggle between what has been and what could be.

¹² In Argentina, there is a close relationship between 'leather' and 'body', since in colloquial language, 'leather' is used to refer to skin. This synonymous relationship is due to a kind of culturally ingrained wordplay, in which 'leather' as a raw material is associated with human skin because of the material similarity and, perhaps, because of the perception that both things -leather and human skin- have a protective quality for the body. A common example of this is the expression '*estar en cuero*', which in Argentina is used to describe a person who is naked from the waist up, or sometimes completely naked. The image here is that the person is alone with his or her 'leather', without any extra layer covering him or her.

or even tango¹³. That is to say, dances that would not be considered as Argentinean from an essentialist perspective, such as ballet or even contemporary dance. In this sense, folklore in Argentina has been historically thought of from a romantic and nationalist perspective¹⁴, where dances have been reconstructed from archives compiled in the past and conceived as closed and immovable. One of the most influential figures in this reconstruction was Carlos Vega (1898-1966)¹⁵, a musicologist, folklorologist and anthropologist who, with state support, developed an important compilation of dances. This invites us to reflect on the relationship between power and culture, and on which dances were promoted and which were sidelined.

Although Argentine folklore, mainly in relation to its dances, is the result of multiple cultural hybridisations (Canclini, 1989) - the product of the interaction between indigenous, African and Spanish cultures, among others - this does not imply that certain practices have not stood out above others. *La Era del Cuero* incorporates, however, dance movements such as the *carnavalito* or the *pala pala*, which have much stronger influences from indigenous cultures than from the Spanish. The *pala pala* - a dance within the Argentinean folk repertoire - can mainly be traced back to the northeast of Argentina and is associated with the Quechua tradition. It is usually accompanied by music in that language, and its name can be translated as crow. It is a playful dance that imitates the bird trying to conquer the *chuña* (pigeon). However, there is a debate between Vega's theory and Chazarreta's¹⁶. While the latter argues that it is a dance of indigenous origin, Vega argues that it is a variant of a ballroom dance, so its

¹³ The distinction between folk dances and the tango is due to the existence of a debate in which folk dances are considered to be in relation with a rural or non-urban environment, while the tango is a popular dance but located in the city. On the other hand, according to the theory of folklore that has become hegemonic in Argentina, it does not fulfil some of the characteristics to be considered folklore. Although this debate exceeds the objectives of the present research, it is a clarification that should be taken into account when mentioning these dances as separate.

¹⁴ The construction of an Argentine nation was largely based on a romantic ideal, in the classical sense of the term, fostered by the so-called 'generation of the year 37' (Myers, 2005).

¹⁵ In his work, the following titles stand out with regard to dances: *Las danzas populares argentinas* (in two volumes, 1952) and *El origen de las Danzas folklóricas* (1956).

¹⁶ Andrés Chazarreta (1876-1960) was an Argentine musician born in the province of Santiago del Estero.

origin is criollo. This tension reveals the conflicts and negotiations present in the construction of national identities. Far from being a harmonious process, cultural hybridity is crossed by conflicts, negotiations and negations.

This hierarchization is not only based on esthetic or cultural criteria, but is part of a power-knowledge apparatus that selects, legitimizes and prioritize certain forms of knowledge and practices over others (Foucault, 2007; 2008). In this context, the state — and the institutions that produce truth — not only makes certain cultural forms visible, but simultaneously renders invisible, silences or domesticates those that do not conform to its hegemonic national project. This determines which bodies and dances deserve to be preserved and which are relegated or disciplined. These processes are not neutral; they inherently contain a racial component, which is evident in the example of the *pala pala* and the debate between Vega and Chazarreta, where the question of whether its origin is indigenous or criollo is discussed. This dispute helps to illustrate the tensions associated with the presence or denial of the indigenous component in the construction of national identity. In the *pala pala* scene from Rotemberg's work, for example, a song in French is used and the dancers wear *ponchos*¹⁷ that simulate the wrapping of a famous Argentinian sweet. At the same time they incorporate elements of this folkloric dance combined with other techniques and styles. In a way, this can crystallise this hybridisation not only between the criollo and the indigenous, but in this case adding the commercial dimension and the foreign.

Thus, through a combination of different dances and visual elements, and with music by Ginastera¹⁸, the work unfolds a journey through this dystopian future in which flashes and even rays of the past - represented on the screens - emerge. This idea can be read in Benjaminian terms as that past flashing into the present. This comes out strongly, especially in the second act, when the

¹⁷ A typical piece of clothing in Argentinean culture and present in different parts of the country.

¹⁸ Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983) was an Argentine composer, creator of the music for the ballet *Estancia*. Considered one of the so-called nationalist ballets, it was premiered in 1952 during the second government of Juan Domingo Perón (1952-1955). For an analysis of the relationship between national identity and this type of production, see: Cadús (2020).

'founding fathers' are brought into question. The question of where these 'founding fathers' are is asked in English, subtitled on the screen at the back of the stage. This device is repeated throughout the play, amid shouts of 'Long live the fatherland!' and the use of words in a foreign language, which relates to the construction of one's own national identity in opposition to the other. Folklore, in its essentialist and traditionalist aspect, has historically been a tool used to think of a common culture that protects the nation against the foreign. One of the architects of this view was Leopoldo Lugones¹⁹, who, faced with the migratory phenomenon of the early twentieth century, proposed the gaucho - and particularly Martín Fierro - as an emblematic figure of the nation.

The aforementioned work by José Hernández, consisting of *El gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872) and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879), illustrates some of the conflicts that affect the figure of the gaucho. Broadly speaking, in the first poem, Fierro is recruited to serve in the army, where he is abused and mistreated, and becomes an outlaw who lives a free life on the pampas. In the second poem, after years of wandering, he seeks reconciliation with his community from a perspective in which honour and justice replace violence. In short, this figure is full of contradictions; his rebellious streak made him a hero for the popular sectors, far removed from the model of nation promoted by the elites. However, given the impossibility of eliminating him from the popular imagination, they sought to resignify him as a national emblem, exalting attributes such as patriotism, nobility and virility, while omitting his rebelliousness or his link to banditry (Adamovsky, 2019). However, the popular sectors resisted this appropriation, reappropriating its rebellious dimension²⁰.

The nation, understood as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1993), is constituted on the basis of a symbolic system shared by people who, although

¹⁹ Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938) was an Argentine writer, one of his most influential works was the *Guerra Gaucha* (1905), his 1913 lectures were fundamental in the construction of the gaucho as a symbol of the Argentine nation.

²⁰ In general terms, the figure of Martín Fierro was consolidated as an archetype of the struggle for social justice, rebellion against the injustices of power and the defence of national identity. An idea that appeared with great force during the first Peronism (1946-1952).

they do not know each other, feel part of a whole. This social and political construction (Hobsbawm, 1992) is crossed by violence - both physical and symbolic - which is often hidden, presenting these processes as harmonious and natural. An example of this is the figure of the gaucho, often presented as a national emblem, but at the same time traversed by contradictions, political disputes and symbolic struggles between the elites and the popular sectors. It is essential to briefly restate this conceptual framework since these ideas run through the narrative of the work, as will be seen below and as discussed above.

In this sense, tradition²¹, far from being a mere passive inheritance, becomes a terrain of dispute in which it is decided which elements of the past are incorporated and which are excluded. *La era del cuero* takes up this conflictive dimension of tradition and makes it visible, reflecting a past full of contradictions and violence. In the work, violence is not concealed, but becomes explicit, reflecting a past traversed by tensions that are updated in the present. One scene clearly exemplifies this: the dancers hit each other, simulate fights, shout at each other and even insult each other. It is a well-lit scene, which reveals, cast light and focuses on the violence that occurs between the centre and the proscenium of the stage. Thus, the body appears as a space for the inscription of history, a body that embodies those contradictions, tensions and struggles that give structure to both tradition and nation.

The malambo and the body between the leather and the archive

The title of the first act, *El día después*, can almost be thought of as a question that guides the work: And now what? This question seems to run through the entire work and staging, in which the dancers embark on an erratic and non-linear path in an attempt to answer it and, at the same time, to (re)construct this imagined nation. In this journey, the work presents a critical reflection on

²¹ Defined as a 'selective tradition' (Williams, 1977), i.e. one that highlights certain elements of the past while concealing others, such as violence, conflict and processes of exclusion. This tradition is dynamic and conflictive (Geertz, 1973) and can function as an instrument of domination as well as resistance.

historical time, the idea of nation and the notion of tradition as legacy. This critical perspective is materialised in a *mise-en-scène* that deploys a series of symbolic elements - both visual and corporeal - that put into tension the dominant narratives on Argentinean identity. Among these elements, not only those present in the costumes and set design stand out, as previously mentioned, but also the appearance of a key figure: the gaucho. This subject, loaded with historical significance, is presented accompanied by characteristic symbolic elements, such as horses, the bass drum or the riding crop. However, what is interesting is that the gaucho's recognition does not depend so much on these elements - which become accessories - but on the dance he performs: the malambo. It is through this bodily practice that the character becomes recognisable, which makes evident the central place of the body in the construction of meaning.

The malambo, along with the tango, has historically been one of the most representative dances of Argentine culture, especially in its relationship with foreign countries, both being frequently chosen as emblems of national identity in international circuits. Unlike most of the dances that make up the folkloric archive, the malambo is characterised by being an individual dance, although it can also be performed in pairs or in groups. It is divided into two main styles: the southern and the northern, differentiated by their technique and region of origin. The southern malambo stands out for its agility and range of movement, while the northern malambo is characterised by its sound and the percussive force of the footwork. These differences are also reflected in the footwear: the light and flexible *bota de potro* favours the fluidity of the southern malambo, while the *bota fuerte*, with sole and heel, allows for a more sonorous and powerful performance in the northern style.

It is crucial to understand that these movements require a specific technique and considerable physical dexterity, given the effort they place on the dancers' bodies. In malambo, the relationship between the body and the floor is central, not only technically, but also in terms of expression and even symbolically, if we consider its link with the figure of the gaucho. To achieve this,

posture is fundamental, since, in addition to protecting the dancer from injury - given the strong impact on the knees - the semi-flexed knees facilitate rapid movements, turns and changes of direction with precision. Through this flexion, energy flows naturally from the body to the floor and vice versa, generating both physical and expressive dynamics. The torso, on the other hand, is kept upright as a way of accompanying the strength of the movements.

By knowing this technique, the performers of *La Era del Cuero* can play at breaking those forms that, in many cases, instead of being flexible, end up restricting the expression of the body. Often, this dance becomes strenuous and as an example that shows this at play, although it can be noticed at various moments, one of the dancers, standing in a lit corner, performs an arduous malambo sequence in a more traditional style. As the scene unfolds, he continues tapping his feet until, as he approaches the proscenium, he falls down in a faint or near death, evoking the image of a zombie, in a symbolic game.

In this sense, in *La Era del Cuero* the malambo does not appear as a pure or closed form. While it is easily recognisable in the *cepillados*, *puntas*, *quebradas*, *repiqueos* (rapid footwork)²² and in the sound that is sought to be reproduced by the feet, it is combined with elements of other dances. The performers incorporate both southern and northern malambo without distinguishing between them, but movements from other dance styles also appear. In addition, the dancers appear on stage both in boots and barefoot, breaking with the costume of the traditional malambo dancer. This costume, which usually includes elements of gaucho aesthetics -such as baggy country trousers, sash, shirt and hat (wide-brimmed, low-crowned, in sober colours and materials such as leather or felt)-, is transformed in the work. The shirts tied at waist level, the pink jackets, the red boots and hats or the fringed belts, lead these dancers towards the language of the monstrous that this production propounds.

²² Movements performed with the feet characteristic of the malambo.

Thus, the elements which are present in the work distance the malambo from its traditional form, although its movements continue to resonate with spectators as a clear reference. This staging makes it clear that this dance is also the product of historical processes of negotiation and struggle, where it has been assigned specific characteristics that give it legitimacy within a common culture. From this perspective, the malambo, like other expressions of folklore, has been subject to essentialist and romantic readings that sought to give it fixed attributes. These ideas have been the basis for many years of folk dance and music festivals, many of which were created or consolidated during the 1960s²³. Most of them had as their main objective, on the part of the elites, to preserve and promote an 'official tradition' (Chamosa, 2009). Such is the case of the Cosquín Festival²⁴ and the Malambo National Festival, both held in the province of Córdoba.

In this context, the Malambo National Festival²⁵, which was created in 1966, highlights many of the characteristics of traditional malambo. Discursively, the festival positions itself as the defender of the authentic malambo, representative of the Argentinean identity. In fact, when judging the participants, the members of the jury look for certain attributes that should characterise the competitors, the champion, and consequently, his dance. The malambo dancer who performs on that stage must be a man figure, who is strong, austere, solitary, brave, etc., qualities historically associated with the figure of the gaucho. A significant fact is that most of the male performers in *La Era del Cuero* have participated in the Malambo Festival, which gives them an

²³ During this decade there was a 'boom' in folklore, understood as a tool to reaffirm the national identity in the face of foreign cultural influences such as rock or pop, which were widely spread through mass media such as the radio or the cinema. In addition, these festivals had the function of promoting local economies by attracting crowds that stimulated trade.

²⁴ For more on this analysis see: Diaz (2009; 2018).

²⁵ This festival is held every year in Laborde, a small town in the province of Córdoba, whose economy is based on agricultural activities. The competition is divided into different categories, the most outstanding of which is the Senior Male Soloist, although there are also quartet categories, dance couples, youth categories, National Malambo Countrywoman, among others.

experiential knowledge, conscious or not, in these debates²⁶. This experience allows them not only to speak 'about' the malambo, but also to do so 'from' it.

Understanding these characteristics of the traditional, *La Era del Cuero* can be understood as a critical reading of this notion, particularly through the dancers' bodies. At times, the performers adopt upright postures, while at other times their bodies appear hunched over, playing with the idea of monsters or zombies. Almost as if they were traversed by bodily memories of a past that remind them how they should prepare themselves in order to *malambear*. The zapateo, for example, at times responds to a traditional style, while at other times it departs from that approach, creating a constant tension in which it almost seems as if the dancers are fighting with their own bodies. The historical, political and cultural processes represented throughout the work are incarnated in these bodies, which are themselves products of these processes.

In short, *La Era del Cuero* can be thought of as a work that questions the construction of a common culture. It does so through multiple resources: dance, costumes and musical selection. A clear example is the contrast between the beard and the long, wild hair, representing a typical image, and a costume that includes dissonant elements. Another interesting example is the body posture: while the malambo is characterised by an upright posture, with the chest inflated and the chin held high, in the work the dancers, at various moments, appear hunched over. At other moments, the work seeks to exaggerate the movements of this dance, characterised by strength, masculinity and virility. But it also shows moments of contrast, in which these movements are presented with softer ones.

The work closes with 'Danza Final: Malambo' by Ginastera, throughout the work, his name is projected on the stage wall, where it is shown to which of the composer's pieces the music belongs. Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983) became a prominent Argentine composer for creating the music for the ballet

²⁶ These debates in the Argentinean folkloric dancers community and especially the malambo dancers community can be seen in the regulations by the National Malambo Festival of Laborde: http://www.festivaldelmalambo.com.ar/archivos/menu/FNM-2025-Reglamento_240606_232654.pdf (last visited 04/19/2025).

Estancia, premiered at the Teatro Colón in 1952 and considered one of the nationalist ballets. These ballets were sponsored by the state as a way of spreading an idea of nationhood based on the romantic ideal already mentioned. In this context, *Estancia* became the nationalist ballet that was the most widely performed and versioned, promoting a certain idea of nation linked to criollism, in which the countryside represents what is authentically Argentine (Cadús, 2020). Thus, the nation appears once again in its romantic aspect, in which conflicts and violence are erased. Furthermore, Ginastera has been analysed by academic critics, who have claimed that he was a composer who transformed the malambo into a more stylised and refined style, considering that other styles are present in his work and not only the malambo (Plesch, 2018). This idea becomes problematic because it relegates this dance to a practice that only represents an Argentine tradition, assuming that the malambo is a 'rustic' style that should be refined to have artistic value.

The last act of *Estancia* seeks to represent a malambo duel between gauchos with a music charged with energy and an almost frenetic rhythm. That energy is represented in *La Era del Cuero*, but considering the idea of nation in a critical way. In the work, this final act does not represent a duel, but the dancers dance together, in a nation that, for a moment, manages to present itself as united and in communion. The movements they perform do not retain the harmony of *Estancia* and, at times, also break with the unison between the malambo and other dances, which spasmodically cross these bodies.

In this sense, the performers can be thought of as bearers of a bodily memory, which can act as a living archive that allows us to rethink the existing modes of archiving in dance. The construction of these memories is linked to generationally transmitted practices, but which are updated and transformed, exceeding the verbal and written dimension. From this perspective, the

corporeal not only represents, but also inscribes and reconfigures identity meanings, constituting a space where these are negotiated and disputed²⁷.

Conclusions. Resistances through dance: bodies that archive

Throughout this article we proposed to problematize different ideas and concepts that, historically, have been part of the theoretical debates about Argentine history, linking it to dance. With the choice of *La Era del Cuero*, we sought to shed light on these debates, especially with regard to the relationship between dance, nation, tradition, identity, history and archive. Rotemberg's work allows us to think critically about the ways in which these notions are constructed, updated and disputed.

Through the malambo - an element deeply rooted in the national imaginary - the work tensions those essentialist readings that understand it as a fixed or pure expression, revealing instead its historically constructed character and the symbolic and material violences that traverse it. In this framework, the dancers' bodies embody these historical processes, presenting themselves as living archives of bodily memories. In this sense, the body not only reproduces dance forms of the past, but also transforms and resignifies them, questioning the limits of what is considered 'folkloric', 'traditional' or 'national'.

In other words, there is a corporeal memory that must be taken into account in order to understand historical, political, cultural and economic processes. For this reason, it is fundamental - in spite of its limitations - to give value to what the agents say about what they do or did, what they remember, etc. and to fill in these gaps from a critical historical perspective. For this reason, it is essential to build a history that recaptures those othernesses that were hidden. Othernesses that appear, that resist, that show the possibility of agency since they are not passive subjects but agents with capacity for action. In this

²⁷ As André Lepecki (2006) argues, choreography can be thought of as a space where the archive of movement is constantly updated, revised and even resisted, allowing the body to challenge the temporal regimes imposed by dominant historical narratives.

regard, future research could deepen the relationships between gender and ethnicity, variables that, although beyond the scope of this work, are essential for the further development of this analysis, as shown by the research of de la Puente (unpublished). In this study, the author examines the figure of the captive woman and her appearance in *La Era del Cuero*, a female body marked by violence and miscegenation, as she analyzes. In addition, the work proposes the term queer as an interpretative tool to understand the possible shared future of the nation. For these reasons, although not explored in depth in this article, these variables are central to further research.

From a critical point of view, *La Era del Cuero* does not present a nostalgic or closed vision of a lost identity, but builds a scenic time in which different temporalities coexist, allowing us to think of the Argentine nation as a space of conflict. The past bursts into a post-apocalyptic future, where the characters question their origin, particularly through the figure of the 'founding fathers', such as Facundo Quiroga or Sarmiento²⁸, incorporating the classic dichotomy between civilization and barbarism. This idea extends throughout the work and is also represented by those 'strange' and monstrous gauchos who are recognized through their dance: the malambo. These gauchos could represent that barbarism which is nothing more than that other who the dominant narratives seek to invisibilize and silence. They dress strangely, perform strange movements and inhabit a familiar but strange place. In this sense, the work makes visible an incomplete history, where othernesses that resist emerge and have agency, and dispute the right to be part of the national narrative.

Thus, the malambo does not appear as a closed practice or frozen in time, but as a field of struggles that challenges both dancers and spectators, raising questions about what nation, what traditions and what memories we wish to build for the future. In these questions, it also becomes extremely necessary

²⁸ In very general terms, Sarmiento described the gaucho as an ignorant subject who was an obstacle in the path to civilisation. Sarmiento used the figure of Quiroga to illustrate his criticism of 'barbarism'. For a more detailed analysis of Sarmiento's work, see Sarlo (1993) and Terán (2008).

to question who can legitimately define the 'authentic'. Although this research did not focus on the question of gender, it is important to highlight that the work also questions the traditionally male conception²⁹ of malambo by having all dancers - without distinction - perform it. This invites us to think, on the one hand, who can dictate what the malambo really is? That is to say, who can to define it legitimately? And on the other hand, is it really necessary - or even possible - to try to recover these forms in a 'pure' way?

In the project of *La Era del Cuero* it is made explicit that the constitution of a nation involves the existence of violence, which silences voices, hides them and is constructed on an 'other' from which it differs. In this sense, the bodies on stage not only dance but also activate memories, produce archives, and become spaces where multiple temporalities are inscribed. By moving, they question the linearity of historical time and stage a temporal heterogeneity where the past is not presented as a lost origin, but as a place to question. Perhaps it is not a matter of recovering an 'authentic' malambo, but of recognising those bodily memories that keep it alive and in permanent transformation. Living bodies in dialogue with the dead, as if they were zombies appearing on stage in a new era, to question and rethink our past, and with it, our present and our future. In this sense, and to return to the hypothesis that has guided this work, the inclusion of the malambo through these living bodies activates memories that question the national symbols understood as fixed and allow us to imagine new forms of identity, tradition and nation. Because, as one of the dancers in the piece states: 'folklore is alive', and in that vitality lies also its power to reconfigure the narratives of the nation. Therefore, we must rethink what archives we want to build and ask ourselves how to think archives in dance, and what place bodies occupy in this dispute of meanings.

²⁹ This is the reason for the non-participation of women in the National Malambo Festival, as it seeks to 'preserve that tradition'. Something similar happens at the Cosquín Festival, which in 2025 had a female malambo winner for the first time: Yamila Aguado. On the other hand, the National Women's Malambo Championship was created as an interesting experience to analyse the relationship between gender and malambo.

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Recebido em 30 de abril de 2025.

Aprovado em 21 de julho de 2025.