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Embodying the Nation: Beauty Queens and Miss Argentina in the Global Context

This paper is part of a broader research about cultural representations of gender and modernity and its relation with the creation of national identity in the interwar period, taking Buenos Aires as a case study.

In this paper, I analyze representations of Argentina's national identity through the study of beauty contests held in Buenos Aires during the interwar period. First, I examine internal contests, which selected the most beautiful Argentine woman and crowned them as Beauty Queens. Then, I study how the participants embodied the modern girl figure through an analysis of the interviews conducted to the winners. Finally, I consider two Miss Argentina contests and study how they represented a national notion of modern femininity.

Through a textual and visual analysis of beauty pageants, a contradiction arises. In general terms, the 'Beauty Queens' of several internal pageants embodied the figure of the global modern girl. They had painted face, short bobbed hair and loose-fitting clothes, and were fan of sports and dancing. However, the winners of two beauty pageants organized to choose Miss Argentina and represent Argentina in a global stage embodied a visual representation of national femininity that, while embracing modernity, also expressed a certain kind of 'primitivism', a mix of traditionalism and exoticism. Through this tension, I intend to show how beauty contests functioned as an arena to redefine a national type of beauty and national identity.

The main hypothesis of the paper, and I would add of my research, is that modern femininities served as a way of dealing with questions raised by modernity and tradition during the process of construction of an Argentine national identity. My main assumption is that discourses of nationhood and of modern gender identities are part of the same process, mutually constituting each other. Womanhood have paid a special role in postcolonial countries as signifiers of both tradition and modernity.

As in other parts of the world, several beauty contests were organized during the interwar period in Argentina. Some of them were internal contests, aimed to select 'Beauty Queens', the most beautiful Argentine woman. Others were organized to choose Miss Argentina and represent Argentina in a global stage and the winners presented particular characteristics if compared to the first ones.

Regarding Beauty Queens, in February 1928 and 1929, the magazine *El Hogar* launched two contests, which had to select the most beautiful Argentine young woman. The contests

developed into a national event, with clear rules of organization. Entrants were asked to send two photographs of themselves, a close-up and a photo of the entire body. They were also told to meet standard body measures. Native women between 16 and 25 sent their pictures to the editors, who selected twenty final candidates from each province and published their photos. The readers chose the most beautiful girl among these pictures by sending their votes to the editors, but the final decision was taken by a jury in an elaborated public spectacle. The set of rules that the magazine established became the basis format, with little variations, for subsequent competitions.

The close-ups published in the pages of the journal showed beautiful young women, almost always with bobbed-hair and make-up, wearing trendy clothes and endorsing the modern girl's look as in **Figure 1** (Beauty queens of the 1928 contest) and **Figure 2** (beauty queens of the 1929 contest). The participants' expression in the photographic portrait was the most important criterion of selection during the first phase of the contest. Nevertheless, the final decision was made in front of the judges, in a parade where the final selected participants wore bathing suits and were evaluated for both facial and body aesthetic, as we can see in **Figure 3**.

After the ceremony the journalists usually interviewed the winners. The questions revolved around their habits and hobbies and around their thoughts regarding the modern girl. In general, none of them used to work, they generally liked poetry, sports (mostly tennis and swimming) and dancing tango. All of them were single young women living with their families. The winners also expressed that the modern girl –defined by them as one who drinks and smokes cigarettes- was a positive figure, as long as she did not lose her good manners and femininity by doing such things.

By March 1930, *Crítica*, a highly popular newspaper, organized the first Miss Argentina contest, whose winner had to compete with participants of all over the world for the award of Miss Universe in the city of Río de Janeiro. The second one, organized by the newspaper *Noticias Gráficas* in 1932, selected Miss Argentina for the Miss Universe contest held in Belgium. At this point, the discourse of the beauty contest changes, acquiring a scientific and eugenic justification and a patriotic motivation, specially in the case of *Crítica*.

Regarding patterns of beauty, *Crítica* stated that they were choosing the candidate that “besides the qualities of physical beauty, can satisfy those of ‘soul expression’” such as “grace, friendliness, elegance and exquisiteness of sentiments, all of them being essential virtues of the modern woman.” The newspaper specified that their criterion of beauty was a modern one that tended to the “improvement of race.” In the view of *Crítica*, the beauty contest was much more than a mere exercise of vanity and diversion; it has become an eugenic exercise to examine and improve the physical (and spiritual) qualities of Argentine race.

The patriotic mission that Miss Argentina had to play in the global stage was expressed in two ways. On the one hand, the newspaper encouraged its readers to participate in the contest by arguing that Argentina's participation proved that it was a "civilized country", which had left its backward moral prejudices behind and was engaged in this modern type of contests, as the rest of the (civilized) world was. On the other hand, Miss Argentina's duty was that of showing to the rest of the "civilized nations" the "degree of physical perfection that our people have achieved, as well as proving that women of our country have nothing to envy to the most civilized nations of the world."

The physical perfection of Argentine women was the direct product of the melting pot. As an article stated, Argentine women offer "a variety of beauty types, given the cosmopolitan character of the country's population" and are characterized "by a natural physical improvement, product of marriages between descendents of different races." However, the newspaper stated that besides this diversity, there was a type of Argentine woman, who had her "own personality", molded by the influence of "a particular environment and a certain kind of education."

Participants internalized this eugenic and patriotic discourse. One candidate stated: "I adore (...) Buenos Aires and my motherland. This is why I would like to win de final contest; to represent Argentine women in Europe. Once I read that in an international beauty parade in London, South America was characterized trough a black woman. At least, if I go, I will destroy that legend." The journalist added, "Indeed, in front of the golden highlights of the curly hair of Miss Capital Federal, born in Buenos Aires from Argentine parents descendents of Germans, which jury would dare to speak about black 'south americanas?' "

The claim for the existence of a national beauty type, unique and superior in comparison to others due to climate, education and intermingling of different races, was assumed to be inherently white. Mestizo women, known as 'chinas', were erased from this definition of what national femininity was because beauty was defined according to Western patterns. Furthermore, the emphasis on the territory made beauty rely on nature to acquire its unique characteristics. An article described a final candidate as "the best exponent of the melting pot type of our developing race. She is the result of the Argentine sun, of its blue skies, of the modesty of our infinite plains and of the slenderness of our distant mountains, because every physical beauty is the logical result of the beauty of our nature." It was Argentina's exuberant nature which transformed this amalgamation of different races into an exclusive beauty type, symbolically bonding the characteristics of the land to the unique features of Argentine women.

Nevertheless, if mestizo 'race' was not part of this definition of beauty, and if beauty patterns were defined by an emergent beauty culture which promoted a transnational model of

femininity, the effort to reinstall the natural in the Argentine beauty type became something problematic. If Argentina's women were blessed with "spiritual charm" and were also so modern that had nothing to envy to women of 'civilized' countries, if they could even be more beautiful than European women because of the miscegenation of different races, who was this Argentine woman? What was her specificity?

Framed by this eugenic and nationalist discourse, the photos of the winners acquire an important meaning, as they must express Argentineness. But at first glance the photos of the candidates show no remarkable difference with previous contestants of other pageants. They all are white women who endorse the modern girl's look. Nothing denotes they are Argentine. **Figure 4.** However, when the photo of the winner of Miss Argentina is published in the newspaper, a new image emerges, signed by several contradictions.

First of all, she appears wearing a very exotic outfit, which has Spanish and Mexican reminiscences. **Figure 5** The Spanish shawl she is wearing, known as Manton the Manila, was widely famous in the twenties and expressed exoticism and cosmopolitanism

Second, the winner looks rather uncomfortable and tense. This stands in opposition to the content of the article that frames the photo, whose title is "The smile of Miss Argentina". Her smile is remarked as her main attraction and she is described as a "spontaneous, sincere, happy and natural person", who "does not have the affectation of studied poses". It is even more contradictory when this photo is related to another article describing her as the embodiment of porteño girls, a synthesis of the city. According to the newspaper, she represents "the young woman of the 30s, for whom the diverse sounds of the city, the bus, the subway, the elevators are well-known". The next image of her published by *Crítica*, after the portrait with the Manton de Manila, is a photomontage of Miss Argentina with cars. The images express urban modernity. The title featured her as a "Modern Eve". **Figure 6** But the outfit she was wearing when she won the contest seems to contradict parallel statements about her natural manners and her modern urban profile.

Why did the newspaper make her put such an outfit when she had to embody Miss Argentina? The answer to this question lies in the ultra modern but at the same time peculiar character of what she is wearing. As a modern young woman, she has to wear something that signifies modernity. At the same time, as Miss Argentina, she has to wear something that expresses Argentineness. The exoticism and cosmopolitanism of her outfit intends to encompass both values. In the context of postwar anxiety about national identity, the meaning of being Argentine and modern was being constructed. Beauty contests functioned as an arena where these questions were debated and *Crítica* gave its version of the modern Argentine woman. She was portrayed as the

“quintessential transnational symbol of the modern”: a common person “in the guise of a an exotic global” figure.

In 1932 the same event was organized, this time by the newspaper *Noticias Gráficas*. When the final election of the winner took place, in a parade which included night dresses, Miss Cordoba, who became the winner of the contest, wears a very simple outfit, with her hair combed in two braids that cross over her head, and the only striking ornaments are her necklace and earrings. **Figure 7** Her visual difference from the other candidates did not pass without recognition. A caricature of the final parade shows Miss Capital Federal on the left, with a low-cut neckline dress, blond hair and a feather tippet, while Miss Cordoba is standing in front of her in a much more traditional attire. **Figure 8** Through an analysis of the photos, Miss Argentina has nothing that connotes modernity.

Nevertheless, when interviewed by the journalist, Miss Argentina, daughter of Basque family, stated being fan of movies and movie stars, and fond of swimming and playing tennis, all activities that marked her as a typical modern girl and which were highly praised by the newspaper. But she also confessed she did not use make-up and she was compelled by the judges to put some lipstick before the final ceremony. The journalists described her as “an authentic beauty, a beauty of pure features” an “evocation of a magnificent woman of the Argentine historical past”. Her face is described as the combination of all Argentine graces, which can be recognized in her “profound green eyes, in her tiny and admirable mouth, in her brown face and in her abundant dark hair, all features that fit in with her native type of beauty.” In this case, the combination of modern habits with an “authentic” traditional look which did not need make-up to enhance her beauty, seems to have worked in the construction of a modern yet national symbol of femininity.

Even though Miss Argentina of 1932 seemed to represent better the feminine spirit of the country than Miss Argentina of 1930 or Miss Capital Federal, the organizers of the contest faced another problem. They were required to send her abroad with the typical dress of the country, as the other participants of the world were supposed to do. The issue was debated in an article, where it was stated that “as it is known, Argentina does not have such a typical attire. The clothing of ‘la chinita’, which can be considered the only one that belongs to us, does not have the necessary diffusion in the country as to consider it an expression of our national customs. However, it is under consideration the possibility of using it”. Miss Argentina of 1932, although wearing a traditional outfit and representing “authentic beauty”, could not acquire the visual status of being the feminine symbol of Argentineness.

In conclusion, I would say that from the discursive and visual analysis of the beauty contests, it is clear that the patriotic and eugenic rhetoric used by the organizers and participants of the beauty contest recreated an image of Argentina where the only accepted intermingling was between European and white 'criollo' population. This narrow definition of the "national type" created a feminine symbol of the nation based on a white and western representation of native modernity. Aboriginal and mestizo women were excluded from representing the nation because they were not modern/white enough. The beauty contestants, whether Beauty Queens or Miss Argentina, stabilized the identity of the modern girl. Through their participation in a transnational discourse about beauty culture, they fashioned themselves like modern young women and consequently bobbed their hair, wore low-cut dresses and make-up. Their habits were modern but still somewhat innocent. They liked movies, dancing the tango, doing sports and driving a car, but they rejected smoking and drinking as habits which could corrupt a women's spirit. However, Miss Argentina could not settle national identity as feminine. The incapacity of transforming the china figure into something modern left Miss Argentina candidates with few options. They could be presented as ultramodern exotic and cosmopolitan figures or as traditional ones, but in both cases they lacked a symbol image of Argentine woman. Could it be that Argentina was so engaged with the project of modernity that there was little space for the emergence of a modern yet national woman figure? While Argentina's national identity in the interwar period was mainly symbolized by the gaucho's masculine culture, its feminine counterpart had to look at a transnational modern figure of femininity to encounter its own distinguishing images and symbols.

