



Generational Discord and Moral Deviance Seen in *Cuentas pendientes* and *Más liviano que el aire*

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Martin Kohan's¹ *Cuentas pendientes* (2010) and Federico Jeanmaire's² *Más liviano que el aire* (2009, *Premio Clarín de Novela*) present lifelike depictions of a disparate assortment of criminal and sexually deviant acts by Argentina's populace. Essentially, both narratives offer portrayals of circumstances and events that are highly analogous to their nonfictional counterparts, or rather, the two novels attain a high degree of verisimilitude apropos of factual matters that stand out for their adverse ramifications on Argentine society in the public and private domains. Interestingly, both works even suggest at times that the issues in question are relevant worldwide. Furthermore, both novels capitalize on the respective protagonist's advanced age to propose an intriguing generational perspective to the moral

questions delineated and problematized in these texts. The viewpoint of that of an older and apparently more socially conservative generation constitutes a key focal point for the polemical Argentine issues that visibly emerge from these works. Kohan and Jeanmaire employ the generational mind-set and perception of their elderly main characters to endow their novels with a denunciatory overtone in view of the pernicious social occurrences portrayed therein. While acknowledging that both works possess other notable thematic/character related elements exclusive to each, this study seeks a comparative and intertextual reading of Kohan's and Jeanmaire's works that examines the abovementioned matters pertaining to some of the most morally and

¹ Martín Kohan was born in Buenos Aires in 1967. He is a novelist, short story writer, and essayist. His literary works to date include the novels: *La pérdida de Laura*, 1993; *El informe*, 1997; *Los cautivos*, 2000; *Dos veces junio*, 2002; *Segundos afuera*, 2005; *Museo de la Revolución*, 2006; *Ciencias morales*, 2007; *Cuentas pendientes*, 2010; *Bahía Blanca*, 2012; *Fuera de Lugar*, 2016; *Confesión*, 2020. His collections of short stories include: *Muero contento*, 1994 and *Una pena extraordinaria*, 1998. He also teaches literary theory at the Universidad de Buenos Aires and at the Universidad de la Patagonia.

² Federico Jeanmaire was born in Baradero, Buenos Aires province in 1957. He is a writer and professor of

literature at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, specializing in the *Siglo de Oro*. He has published more than 20 books of fiction and non-fiction, and has won several Argentine literary prizes. Among his renowned works are the novels *Mitre* (winner of the *Premio Especial Ricardo Rojas*), *Vida interior* (*Premio Emecé*), and *Más liviano que el aire* (*Premio Clarín*). His 1990 novel *Miguel*, a fictional biography of Cervantes, was nominated for the *Premio Heralde*, as was the subsequent novel *Amores enanos*. His book *Una lectura del Quijote* (Seix-Barral, 2004) is considered a major contribution to the area of Cervantes scholarship.

socially charged behaviors near the turn of the twenty-first century in urban Argentina.

In her *Los prisioneros de la torre: Política, relatos, y jóvenes en la postdictadura* (2011), Elsa Drucaroff scrutinizes over five hundred works published post 1990 by more than two hundred Argentine writers that she denominates as the *nueva narrativa argentina*, or the “NNA,” belonging to that epoch. She describes this corpus of narratives while also establishing an historical nexus to the Argentine military dictatorship of 1976-1983:

«NNA» alude a rasgos novedosos que pueden detectarse en la narrativa de escritores y escritoras que nacieron después de 1960 y surgieron a partir de los 90; «narrativa de las generaciones de postdictadura», por su parte, subraya, en este caso, que esa novedad respecto de la literatura anterior está relacionada con un trauma que afecta a la sociedad argentina y proviene, como todo trauma, de un pasado negado y doloroso. (17)

Whereas Drucaroff points out the original traits ascertained in her study of literature produced after 1990, she also affirms that these novelties are intimately related to a “trauma” that affects Argentina society and that stems from a denied and painful past, a clear reference to the *Proceso de la Reorganización Nacional* and its legacy. Respecting this societal trauma of post-dictatorship Argentina, Drucaroff references it anew amid the main objectives of her exhaustive study. She declares her ambitions are to: “perseguir en algunos libros de la NNA, y en algunos problemas literarios, ideologías, imaginarios inconscientes y conflictos hasta ahora irresueltos que laten en nuestra tierra y que la literatura condensa más allá de la voluntad individual de los escritores. Leer, en definitiva, en las obras, deseos o traumas sociales; leer este tiempo y este país” (20). With regards to the “social traumas” as well as the “unresolved conflicts” experienced in post-dictatorship

Argentina and read in the contemporary body of Argentine narratives as proposed by Drucaroff, that which psychoanalyst and historian Silvia Bleichmar affirms in her *No me hubiera gustado morir en los 90* (2006) is directly relevant. She argues that since the inception of Argentina’s last military dictatorship, the nation has suffered a troublesome and unsettling breakdown of what she calls the “rules of the game,” these understood to be several basic moral principles and practices that, having considerably eroded, have given way to various manifestations of immorality and degeneracy:

El miedo a la violencia del semejante, a ser atacado físicamente, a ser estafado se ha generalizado hoy en toda la sociedad civil. No es sin embargo sólo la pobreza en la cual está sumida más del cincuenta por ciento de la población lo que lo genera, sino la ruptura de las reglas del juego que se viene dando desde hace más de treinta años. Padecemos aún, consolidados por la corrupción y el deterioro del sistema político, los restos ideológicos de la dictadura: tolerancia a la impunidad, falta de justicia, usufructo de la función pública, desconstrucción de los principios solidarios, pérdida del sentimiento de responsabilidad social compartida, del necesario horror ante el robo y asesinato de los inocentes, que es parte esencial de lo que alguna vez se llamó “condición humana.” (185-86)

In Bleichmar’s estimation, since the year 1976 Argentina has undergone a gradual degradation of values that has simultaneously been superseded by a disturbing series of behaviors and attitudes that she execrates as the “ideological remainders of the dictatorship” (185, my translation). The catalog of behaviors and mentalities as put forth by Bleichmar entails, among other matters, phenomena that are seen in Kohan’s and Jeanmaire’s texts, such

as physical violence, thievery, governmental and judicial corruption, a widespread absence of criminal justice, the destruction of commonly held principles, and a loss of a collective social responsibility. As we detect the aforesaid in the narratives before us, we also discern that which very arguably could be regarded as traumatic and volatile societal conflicts and questions in Argentina near the turn of millennium. Indeed, in these narratives we are allowed to “leer este tiempo y este país” (Drucaroff 20). Additionally, the urban settings of both narratives are significant as they relate to the literary portrayal of ethical and moral issues. The singular capacity of both novels to interrelate the representation of an array of questionable behaviors in urban Argentina with the recondite problems of immorality and ethics is theoretically underscored by what Martin Jens Gurr has averred: “Strategies of narrating urban complexity are to a considerable extent strategies of narrating simultaneity. Conversely, the representation of urban simultaneity as a key component of urban complexity invariably involves at least implies other forms of complexity—complexities of cause and effect, of intersecting spatial scales, or ethical complexities” (13).

In Kohan’s *Cuentas pendientes* certain behaviors that many Argentines might consider to be immoral or unethical are narrated from the perspective of the protagonist of the novel, Giménez, a solitary seventy-something man, separated from his wife, and tenant of a small apartment in Buenos Aires. From the very onset of his novel, Kohan renders the harsh realities of controversial affairs of a fundamentally Argentine or nationwide scope while harnessing Giménez’s uneventful personal life as a narrative vehicle through which the aforesaid affairs are limned. Towards the beginning of the narration we read of a habitual visitation between himself and his estranged wife. Within this quite

unextraordinary setting we discern an intriguing event embedded in the story:

En la habitación de su señora está prendido un velador, y también, como siempre, la radio a transistores, donde justo en este instante una voz nocturna y grave explica a los noctámbulos que no habrá remedio posible para el flagelo de la delincuencia en la Argentina mientras las leyes sigan permitiendo que los criminales entren por una puerta y salgan por la otra, se deduce que de la cárcel. –¿Los chorros sueltos, y nosotros detrás de las rejas? (18-19)

Scarcely a few moments later in the narrative timeline, the radio is heard again and the announcer once more makes direct reference to a current crime wave throughout what can be assumed is a microcosm for the nation as a whole. Additionally, this announcer’s observation is paired with a conspicuously satirical tone that denounces the apparent escalation of violent criminal acts, including rape: “La voz de la radio, que en verdad nunca cesó, se deja oír otra vez en el resuello de la habitación. – Si los violadores no tienen curación, ¿qué esperan nuestros legisladores para votar la pena de muerte?” (22). We perceive three thematic points from these passages. First, in making explicit reference to delinquency via the problem of *chorros*, or Argentine slang for “thieves,” together with that of the rapists, the text alludes to a rise of criminal violence in contemporary Argentina. Second, in both instances Kohan adds a hyperbolic element to underscore the severity of the crimes portrayed in the text. The image of larcenists at large among the public contrasted with a dramatic increase in home security in Argentina corroborates the gravity of the matter at hand. Third, the novel appears to reflect a grave mistrust of many Argentines towards their federal legislative and criminal justice systems. This marked dubiety regarding the efficacy of the justice system,

as well as other illicit and/or generally abhorrent acts, are seen a short time later as the reader again accompanies Giménez in his daily routine:

Por lo común se viste (la camisa del día anterior puesta sobre la camiseta sin mangas que utilizó al dormir) y se va al café de Cabildo y Arenal, cerquita del regimiento. Ahí le prestan un rato el diario y le sirven un café con leche que a veces paga y a veces queda debiendo. Revisa el diario un poco someramente, porque lo único que de veras le interesa de la actualidad del país y del mundo es el avance incontenible de la delincuencia armada. De eso se informa a conciencia: un asalto con toma de rehenes en Burzaco, un joven de diecinueve años al que le pegaron un tiro para robarle la bicicleta, un linchamiento vecinal en Núñez al presunto violador que asuela el barrio, una banda de asaltantes de blindados que ejecuta con todo éxito su tercer golpe consecutivo, el auge del pungueo descuidista en los andenes de las estaciones del tren. Comenta un poco con Salazar, el de la caja, que nunca deja de darle la razón, la desgracia de tener una justicia que es blanda o es cómplice y le hace el caldo gordo a los criminales atando de pies y manos a la fuerza policial. El resto del diario lo sobrevuela o lo descarta: las mentiras de la política, el deporte que ahora es puro negocio, la manga de desviados que sale en la televisión y en el cine, la droga en el rock and roll, el sida. Un mundo en crisis, le propone a Salazar, que ajusta el concepto con la sugerencia de que la crisis es moral antes que nada. (27-28)

As Giménez reads a newspaper in a café in the capital, we learn that what interests him are current events in the nation dealing with a surge of criminal activity as well as the complicity of the Argentine judiciary in wrongful acts. As seen above, Kohan vividly

narrates a conglomerate of violent crimes in different urban sites in the province of Buenos Aires that achieve a plausible and realistic aspect due to his assiduous attention to pertinent details as well as the relevance to literal and nonfictional events in the era he addresses. However, perhaps even more intriguing than the depiction of a medley of crimes around Buenos Aires are the provocative comments Giménez makes to the cashier Salazar on the morality of the nation and world at the turn of the century. As Giménez (and Salazar) comment on the moral/ethical climate of Argentine society and beyond, the novel comprehends an element of social commentary predicated on a barrage of problematic contemporary issues. Wherefore, the text entails an acute artistic stricture of the Argentine public and even extends its rebuke to humanity in general while pointing to a pervasive and extensive moral collapse as the primary culprit.

In his novel *Más liviano que el aire*, Jeanmaire relates the story of fourteen-year-old Santiago, who attempts to rob an elderly woman, Faila, at knife-point in her home in modern-day Buenos Aires. However, his plan fails miserably as this woman somehow traps him in her bathroom. Virtually the entire work is structured around dialogue between her and the would-be thief confined in her lavatory over the course of four days. Jeanmaire's approach throughout the work is to provide Faila's somewhat drawn-out speech while that of Santiago's being exclusively intimated through the many exchanges with his captor as she proceeds to admonish this young criminal, recount to him much of her life story, and give her take on current events in Argentina. On page one, Jeanmaire highlights the generational gap between the two main characters as Faila tells her attacker after entrapping him: "— Siempre se aprende de los viejos. Claro que a ustedes, me refiero a los jóvenes, les parece que no, que nada se puede aprender de una vieja tan vieja como yo. Noventa y tres años,

tengo. Para noventa y cuatro” (11). Soon thereafter she begins to reprove Santiago, or “Santi,” while extending her rebuke to his parents: “–Discúlpeme, Santi, pero la verdad es que no tiene edad para andar robándole a las viejas indefensas con una navaja o con un cuchillo en la mano. Debería estar en la escuela, ahora mismo. O en su casa, con sus padres, mirando la televisión. –Eso está muy mal. No puedo entender que sus padres no lo obliguen a ir a la escuela” (35). Later the same day she again reproaches both parties while also expanding her censure to include the entire nation, effectively accusing Santi and his parents of being a reprehensible prototype for Argentina as a whole, indicting all three entities for distinctive self-serving behaviors:

Ellos, en vez de holgazanear todo el santo día, lo que deberían hacer es darle lo que necesita cualquier chico de catorce años. Lo que pasa es que este es un país de vagos. Está lleno de gente como usted o como sus padres, gente que prefiere robarles por las calles a las viejas, antes que ir a trabajar. Nadie respeta nada, acá. . . . Cada uno hace lo que le parece, lo que se le antoja, lo que le viene en ganas. Nadie piensa en los demás. Nunca. Es un desastre cómo está este país, muchacho. La verdad. (58)

Through his use of collective references to the state or its people, Jeanmaire points to a generalized immorality of the entire nation, a motif that is also seen in Kohan’s text. Indeed, this theme of a widespread moral degeneracy directly linked to many of the nation’s ills constitutes one of the most salient themes in both novels. To achieve this objective both authors delve deeply into the sociohistorical fabric of Argentina’s urban populace to illustrate a *mélange* of issues that many would judge as societal misconduct, if not violent crime, such as homicide, rape, assault, theft, drug and alcohol abuse, etc. Additionally, both works narrate instances

or make overt references to sexual assault and rape, incest, sexual promiscuity, and prostitution among the nation’s youth. As we proceed to scrutinize passages in Jeanmaire’s narrative, at another moment in the text we read of Faila’s keen interest in the occurrence of violent crimes to include armed robbery and murders committed by youths in contemporary Argentina. In addition to this, she paints a depressing social and moralistic picture for Argentina and beyond:

Qué mal que está el mundo, muchacho. Pasa cada cosa ahí afuera. Da miedo. Hoy contaron de un chico que mató a tres compañeros en una escuela. Se enojó porque le hacían bromas, le robó la pistola a su padre que era policía o gendarme, no me acuerdo, fue a clase y empezó a tirar tiros. Mató a tres de sus compañeros y hay unos cuantos más que quedaron heridos. Y también contaron que otro pibe, bastante más chico que usted, de once años, robó un quiosco y mató al dueño. Para robarle veinte pesos, lo mató. Un horror. (81)

Via the stark yet descriptive passage above, Jeanmaire endeavors to narrate instances of brutal homicides in Argentina while his main character assertively condemns the moral climate of Argentina and beyond. Later in the novel, readers discern from the viewpoint of the protagonist the expressive depiction of the discovery of the bodies of two local adolescent girls who were truant from school to seek employment at an apparently fake modeling agency. In the passage below we detect a trio of issues respecting the intertextual themes I have identified. First and foremost, the character Faila once again appears to carry out a bleak dual moral appraisal of the Argentine populace and humanity worldwide, even going so far as to forecast a desolate future for younger generations. Also noteworthy is her

hyperbolically dark yet compelling assessment of personal security as it relates to the potential for physical violence. Another matter visible in the text is that of a contextual *mise-en-scène* characterized by a dystopian and violent society, one where seemingly “perfect” crimes are committed and unresolved questions abound. Worthy of mention as well is that Jeanmaire avoids entirely (throughout the novel) the mention of any leads or clues for the brutal killings of the two adolescents, thus reinforcing the aforesaid points while leaving the reader to doubt that justice will be served:

Encontraron a dos chicas muertas. Tiradas a un costado de las vías. En un barrio del sur o del oeste, no sé muy bien, no conozco esa zona. Una tenía dieciséis años y la otra diecisiete. Dos nenas, qué barbaridad. El mundo está hecho un horror. Ya no se puede salir tranquilo ni siquiera a la puerta de calle. Qué futuro más negro que les espera, muchacho. Me da lástima por ustedes, los jóvenes, a mí no me queda nada de tiempo, ya viví lo que tenía que vivir. Pero ustedes, pobres, qué desastre. Aparentemente, por lo que dice una de sus compañeras de colegio, las chicas faltaron a clase para ir a un lugar, una oficina; el aviso había aparecido en el diario, les ofrecían trabajo de modelo publicitario. Y no volvieron más. . . . El señor del informativo, un señor muy serio, muy correcto, se preguntaba cómo era posible que una banda de delincuentes pueda publicar con tanta facilidad un aviso en el diario, que no haya nadie que controle el asunto, que los padres no sepan absolutamente nada de lo que hacen sus hijos, que las profesoras no llamen a las casas de sus alumnos para saber por qué motivo es que faltaron a clase, si están enfermas o qué. Muchas preguntas que no tienen respuesta, concluyó. (146-47)

In a manner that parallels thematic elements of Kohan’s text, Jeanmaire adeptly characterizes violence and a degree of anarchy as irrepressible and insuperable facets of Argentine society, even prognosticating an utterly bleak future for the nation’s youth. The graphic representations of violent criminality in the novels have pertinent factual underpinnings. Indeed, the excerpts scrutinized from both works achieve a notable level of mimetic realism due to the expressive ingenuity of both authors as well as the clear nonfictional foundations that support the vividly portrayed incidents in the narratives. Alberto Föhrig, Julia S. Pomares, and Cecilia Gortari point out regarding general crime statistics and also crimes unreported in Argentina circa the turn of the twenty-first century:

Security has become a major concern on Argentina’s public agenda. Although to a lesser extent than in other Latin American countries, there has been an increase in certain types of crimes, particularly those involving physical violence. . . . Added to this are crimes not reported in the police statistics (constituting the so-called *cifra negra* of crime): in the last five years, [from 1995-1999] in the main urban centers, approximately seven out of ten crimes were not reported to the police. (243-44; original italics)

As affirmed above, violent criminal activity (interestingly, both disclosed and undisclosed) towards police in Argentina has seen an uptick in recent years. In his *El atroz encanto de ser argentinos 2* (2007), historian Marcos Aguinis also elaborates on a troubling increase in homicide and other violent assaults in Argentine cities of late:

Los asesinatos y robos han aumentado a ojos vista, aunque los informes oficiales aseguren lo contrario. Ocurren decenas

de violaciones por semana sin que se encuentre a los delincuentes. Sherlock Holmes hubiera deseado vivir en nuestro país, porque la mayoría de los crímenes son perfectos. Hubiese sido un desafío mayor para sus habilidades de detective minucioso. Antes Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Rosario, Mendoza y otras ciudades importantes nunca dormían. Pasear de noche por sus calles constituía uno de los mayores atractivos del país. Mientras crecía la inseguridad en Río de Janeiro o Bogotá, en la Argentina se transitaba por caminos, pampas y montes sin miedo. Pero a partir de 1997 se registró un aumento acelerado de la delincuencia. Y se convirtió en la segunda preocupación del país entero, inmediatamente después de la desocupación. Ahora soportamos una grosera intimidación todos los días. (216-17)

As Aguinis points out, criminal and violent acts have escalated dramatically in urban areas³ since 1997 in Argentina, thus providing historical basis for the realistic events depicted in both novels. Thus, it would appear that the literary passages in question illustrate some of the most pressing societal issues in post-dictatorship Argentina, many of these matters containing a profoundly inherent moral and/or ethical essence. As Mark William Roche reminds us, "Virtually every substantial work of literature engages moral questions, and through these encounters with fictional characters we gain a subtler sense of virtue

³ As Mercedes S. Hinton attests below, during the years of the Carlos Menem presidency (1989-1999), the crime rate had increased dramatically in the metropolitan area of the capital and also the Province of Buenos Aires. This overlaps with Aguinis' assertion of a spike in criminal activity from 1997 onward: "Crime became commonplace in hitherto safe parts of the city, and beggars, vendors, homeless people, broken sidewalks, and garbage strewn streets became common sights. Banks were being ransacked by armed bandits, and so were private homes and even the administrative

and vice" (21). John Gardner (19), Christopher Clausen (5), Immanuel Kant (191), James Farrell (170), and Louis P. Pojman (xiii) have all argued similar points. As Georges Bataille writes respecting what he considers "the essence of literature" (1), he in effect characterizes this artistic form as a consummate communicator of what he considers as "Evil," or that which, among other factors "justifies anguish and disgust" (16). For Bataille literature is so inherently endowed with moral questions that he concludes: "Literature is either the essential or nothing. I believe that the Evil - an acute form of Evil - which it expresses, has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a 'hypermorality'" (1).

As we have seen, via the aesthetic parameters of narrative fiction, Kohan's and Jeanmaire's works represent and particularize grossly immoral, unethical, and criminal behaviors

predicated on the lived reality of Argentina's urban populace. Furthermore, as stated earlier, both authors adroitly utilize the viewpoints of their elderly protagonists as they condemn the behaviors of younger generations to propose an intergenerational perspective to the moral questions delineated in the texts. In a sense, both authors provide a novelistic rendering of what Mempo Giardinelli has put forth as an undeniable social reality occurring between the old and young in Argentina towards the turn of the millennium:

headquarters of the Catholic Church. People became wary of hailing taxis on the street, fearing drivers who robbed their own passengers and dumped them in remote areas. [. . .] Lawlessness was far worse, however, in the *conurbano*, or Greater Buenos Aires. In this sprawling suburban area, many crimes involved hostage taking, and shooting sprees between the provincial police (known as the Bonaerense) and criminals routinely resulted in loss of civilian life" (20, original italics).

La idea de confrontación, el tan meneado choque generacional, últimamente y cada vez más se está revelando como una preocupación exclusiva de los mayores. Pero *no* de los jóvenes. Creo advertir que para nada es un problema que ocupe ni preocupe a los chicos. Son los grandes los que se alarman, teorizan, buscan el apoyo de psicólogos, yerran, maltratan y pifian. . . . Es obvio que cuando hay conflictos intergeneracionales, los que los denuncian y padecen son, ante todo, los adultos. (420-21, original italics)

Hence, the narratives before us would appear to corroborate Giardinelli's proposition of a present-day generational gap or conflict of values, beliefs, or behaviors between elderly individuals (in this case an Argentine septuagenarian and nonagenarian) and much younger individuals, even adolescents and preteens. Nicolás Lucca, born in 1982 at the onset of the millennial or Generation Y group, hints at contemporary generational conflicts in Argentina while also commenting on the apparently perpetual inability⁴ of some of his very own and also older generations to comprehend the mores and doings of young Argentines. It is interesting to note that Lucca utilizes both the last Argentine dictatorship as well as the restoration of democracy immediately thereafter as a temporal reference point, the latter evidently an allusion to Argentines born after 1983:

Y como quien ve el partido desde afuera, tenemos a las generaciones más jóvenes,

quizás los más incomprendidos desde la aparición de los melencidos en la década del sesenta. Puede que muchos sepan qué pasó o qué se hizo durante cada año de la democracia, pero porque tuvieron que estudiarlo. Entre tanto, nosotros y los más grandes seguimos en el *loop* perpetuo de discutir el número de desaparecidos de la última dictadura mientras nos reímos de las costumbres de los más pibes por varios motivos, pero con un hilo conductor: no los entendemos. (23, original italics)

Hence, in post-dictatorship Argentina circa the turn of the century both Lucca and Giardinelli underscore deep generational misunderstandings between the nation's old and young. In his novel *Las noches de Flores* (2004), César Aira briefly adverts to this phenomenon of generational discord as he compares the use of the new technology of GPS in Argentina with the adolescent characters in his work set in Buenos Aires near the turn of the century: "Se sabía tan poco del funcionamiento de un GPS como del funcionamiento de la mente de un adolescente moderno" (18). With this focus, it is Argentina's elderly in both narratives who assume a type of authoritative role as they reproach certain behaviors of the rising generations. This is seen in *Cuentas pendientes* as its readers discern its marked denunciatory component via the perspective of Giménez, who bemoans the conduct of much younger individuals at different points in the plot. On a particular night at his apartment complex, Giménez is awakened

⁴ While in the cited quote Lucca does not explicitly make reference to crimes or unethical behaviors by the youngest of Argentines, he does seem to intimate in his text that Argentina's youth have inherited a mindset that is stoic and complacent towards ethical and other consequential issues having detrimental impacts over the nation: "Estos chicos que nos parecen marcianos a quienes no logramos entender, no aparecieron por generación espontánea, son producto nuestro: 110 por ciento nuestro y de nuestra falta de ganas de levantar la voz en la cola del

supermercado, de no explicarles que Nueva York está administrada por personas comunes y no por extraterrestres en una dimensión paralela. Que las cosas no tienen por qué ser aceptadas sólo «porque te tocó nacer en Argentina»" (25). Among the many ethical issues Lucca addresses in his sociological study of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Argentina are corruption, failed democratic institutions, a flawed criminal justice system, widespread poverty, and other matters.

to the ringing of the electric entry telephone, and he ascertains that:

Es una mocosa insolente que al parecer masca chicle mientras habla con él desde afuera y que al apretar el botón del portero eléctrico se equivocó y tocó mal: quiso tocar primero dos y tocó la planta baja. – ¿Manguera? Manguera es el drogadicto que vive en el departamento situado justo arriba del suyo. Giménez no se explica que la policía no venga a buscarlo para llevárselo detenido (¿y todo por qué? Porque los llamados que efectuó a la comisaría de la zona para denunciar las corrupciones del vecino no tuvieron el aval de su nombre y su número de documento). Lo visitan las chirusas a altas horas de la noche; y como llegan ya borrachas o drogadas o ambas cosas a la vez, confunden una hilera de timbres con la otra, quieren llamar aquí y llaman allá. (68)

The societal and even generational reproof that Kohan injects here into his fictional work is indicative of a formidable problem among the lives of Argentina's adolescents: substance abuse, or rather the misuse of alcohol and narcotics. Both have seen increases by Argentine youth in recent years, most notably in the province of Buenos Aires. In their findings published in 2009, the World Bank suggests that: "Argentines, especially young males, are consuming alcohol earlier in life and in a more risky and harmful manner than earlier generations" (56). In the same study we also note: "City differences are pronounced: young people in greater Buenos Aires have the highest probability of drinking alcohol" (58). Aguinis has written concerning: "La peor plaga" (*El atroz encanto* 220), indicating the ever-increasing availability of illicit drugs for Argentina's youth, as well as the widespread addiction to them by this same demographic group: "Aumentaron el comercio y el consumo de drogas. En los

colegios circulan ríos de cocaína. Los vendedores se han hecho fuertes en los resquicios educacionales públicos y privados. Tienen sus santuarios en villas miserias, en precarios asentamientos y también en departamentos de lujo" (220). In his *Pobre patria mía* (2009), Aguinis again alludes to the question of illegal drug abuse, declaring that: "La Argentina dejó de ser un simple territorio de tránsito en las rutas de la droga. Es ahora consumidor y productor. Cada vez estamos más enlodados por el delito" (115).

Although in his novel Jeanmaire compactly narrates the issue of substance abuse by Argentine minors, it is worthy of perusal. Regarding the previously mentioned homicide committed by an Argentine youth at a *quiosco*, the elderly Faila tells her young captive through the bathroom door: "–Y el otro, el del quiosco, parece que mató al quiosquero porque los veinte pesos que le dio le parecieron muy poco. Se enojó y lo mató, así, sin importarle nada de nada. Seguro que estaba drogado. ¿Usted se droga? – Ay, menos mal. No se drogue nunca querido" (83). A few moments later, Santi yells obscenities and angrily pounds on the door. Faila responds with the suspicion that he is under the influence of illicit drugs: "–A mí me parece que usted debe estar drogado, aunque antes me haya jurado que no. Y capaz que hasta se le ocurre matarme cuando le abra la puerta. Voy a tener que pensar el asunto" (84). Therefore, Jeanmaire's aged protagonist also condemns the problem of substance abuse by Argentina's youth, even appearing to argue for a cause-and-effect nexus between it and physical violence.

Among the behaviors portrayed in the novels are those of a sexual nature; indeed, both narratives point to a sexual libertinism in Argentine society as well as sexual misconduct particularly amidst adolescents. Additionally, the narratives extend their settings beyond Argentina, at times insinuating that the moral questions at hand

are worldwide in scope. In the passage that follows from *Cuentas pendientes*, readers become aware of a notable irony concerning the character Giménez, which is that he is not exempt from participating in the very immorality he rebukes in his own manner, conceivably evoking the protagonist from Ernesto Sábato's classic *El túnel*.⁵ But the aforementioned points are evinced via an episode where Giménez employs the services of an adolescent prostitute of a short stature and slender build: "Arrodillada frente a él, como una devota en un templo, está Lorena: la puta más cara que haya pagado en su vida, la que se va a quedar con el sobre engrosado de billetes que él cosechó hace unos días. Con un poco de criterio se le pueden dar dieciocho años, y con un poco de imaginación, once" (79). A few moments prior to this he also notes: "No tiene tetas: el pecho es plano, una lisura total, una llanura despejada con redondez pero sin turgencia" (75). Upon likening the prostitute's petite physique to that of a typical eleven-year-old girl, Giménez proceeds to make another comparison that examines the issue of shifting moral standards in modern Argentine society:

En otra época, cuando los valores de la sociedad se mantenían firmes, cuando había lo que ahora no hay, educación y respeto, una nena de once años jugaba a las muñecas en su casa o aprendía bordado con su madre, se cobijaba en la inocencia. Pero Giménez sabe bien que las cosas ya no son así, que si hay algo que por doquier existe es lo promiscuo, y que las nenas de once años hoy en día

fuman cigarrillos, toman cerveza, se besan con sus noviecitos metiendo la lengua y todo. Siendo así, como en efecto es, ¿en razón de qué va él a renunciar a tan estimulante comparación? ¿Por qué no va a dejar librado su instinto de asociación, que en otros tiempos implicaba un profanar, si en este mundo corrupto del presente no queda cosa alguna que no haya sido previamente profanada? (76-77)

Thus, from the viewpoint of the septuagenarian protagonist, the novel at hand poses instigative questions with its artistic portrayal of the moral conditions of Argentina's populace by a threefold focus. In the passages above Kohan not only highlights sexual promiscuity and prostitution among Argentina's youth as well as the issue of substance abuse by minors, but also the attentive reader is apt to perceive a broadscale reproach of the immorality of the nation and even the world. Regarding the question of consensual and promiscuous sexual behavior as alleged by Giménez, evidence of rampant sexual activity by Argentine adolescents can be ascertained, for example, via adolescent pregnancy rates in recent years. Five years prior to the publication of *Cuentas pendientes*, one out of every six births in Argentina was to a minor between 15 and 19 years of age (Informe de Naciones Unidas 2005, cited in "El índice"). With respect to said statistic María Fabiana Reina and Camil Castelo-Branco affirm: "Adolescent pregnancy as a problem is not an illusion, but a cruel reality" (174). Mónica Mutti Lovera writes in 2010:

solo como consecuencia de mis peores atributos, de mis bajas acciones. En esos casos siento que el mundo es despreciable, pero comprendo que yo también formo parte de él; . . . Y siento cierta satisfacción en probar mi propia bajeza y en verificar que no soy mejor que los sucios monstruos que me rodean" (119). Furthermore, both men partake in their own way in the immorality they so bitterly objurgate. Castel does so most notably by murdering his lover María Iribarne, Giménez by hiring a teenage prostitute.

⁵ It seems probable that Kohan evokes Juan Pablo Castel from Sábato's *El túnel* (1948). Both texts are set in Buenos Aires and, like Giménez, Castel is a solitary man who condemns what he regards as grossly immoral behaviors from his fellow Argentines and also humankind in general. As Castel acrimoniously declares: "desprecio a los hombres, los veo sucios, feos, incapaces, ávidos, groseros, mezquinos; mi soledad no me asusta, es casi olímpica. Pero en aquel momento, como en otros semejantes, me encontraba

“La maternidad adolescente no es una fantasía de chicas de colegio sino una realidad: de los 700.000 bebés que nacen anualmente en la Argentina, alrededor de 100.000 son hijos de madres menores de 20 años. Estos 100.000 bebés no son todos primogénitos. El 30 por ciento de esas madres está teniendo a su segundo o tercer hijo” (Lovera).

As for commercial and criminal sexual exploitation of minors, this heinous reality has been unremittingly documented, analyzed, and rebuked. Its existence in modern-day Argentina and around the world is irrefutable.⁶ Lydia Cacho maintains: “Cada año, 1.39 millones de personas en todo el mundo, en su gran mayoría mujeres y niñas, son sometidas a la esclavitud sexual. Son compradas, vendidas y revendidas como materia prima de una industria, como residuos sociales, como trofeos y ofrendas” (15). Alfredo Silletta makes a similar affirmation while explicitly including Argentina in this repugnant category of nations: “La venta de niños, la prostitución infantil, la explotación laboral y la utilización de niños en la pornografía no son cuestiones que corresponden a países lejanos de Oriente, son flagelos que ocurren en todos los países, aunque pueden variar en tipos y grados. La Argentina no está exenta” (16).

In his novel Jeanmaire also realistically depicts the question of unhampered sexual promiscuity by Argentina’s youth by delving into sexuality between adolescents and also the highly taboo issue of incest,

particularly in Spanish America.⁷ The matter of incest in latter twentieth- and twenty-first-century Argentina has been examined in a handful of noteworthy sociological studies (Galiñanes 2021; Cárcano 2011; Giberti et al 1998, 2005) that substantiate the factuality of this ignominious act of sex between closely related persons. Films such as Ernesto Aguilar’s *El secreto de Julia* (2019), Lucía Puenzo’s *El niño pez* (2009), and Albertina Carri’s *Gémenis* (2005) all explore this subject in contemporary Argentina. Concerning Jeanmaire’s novel, at one point during their four-day-long dialogue, Faila inquires if Santi has ever had sexual relations and Santi boasts that he indeed has engaged in such relations with an unnamed female and also that he raped his own thirteen-year-old sister, Margarita. Faila responds with a declaration marked by both personal disgust and moralistic reproach:

–¿Estuvo alguna vez con una mujer? –
Pero si sólo tiene catorce años, no me haga reír, ¿cómo ya va a haber estado con dos chicas? –No le creo. –¿Con su propia hermana? –No puede ser. –No, no. –Es un horror lo que está diciendo. Me niego a aceptarlo. Es una monstruosidad. Lo de esa otra nena tan chiquitita vaya y pase, pero con su hermana. Eso está penado por Dios y por la ley. Está en contra de las normas más básicas de la sociedad. (141)

⁶ In the U.S. Department of State’s 2010 multinational Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, the sexual exploitation of children in Argentina is intricately referenced. See Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report 2010 Argentina (Tier 2) available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2010/142759.htm>. Argentina’s ranking of Tier 2 refers to nations whose governments do not fully adhere to the minimum standards of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) passed by the U.S. Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton, but are making substantial efforts to bring themselves into compliance.

⁷ In her essay “Engaged research on incest in Mexico” Gloria González-Lopez comments on the difficulty of attaining certifiable data in Latin America due to, as she states: “Deeply rooted in colonial society, a family ethic of honour and respect forces children and youth to be silent with regard to their sex lives or to avoid discussing any sexuality-related question they may have as a way to show respect to their parents and other authority figures within the immediate and extended family” (311). Nevertheless, as indicated in the main text, Galiñanes, Cárcano, and Giberti et al have provided sociological studies on this matter in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Argentina.

The following day, Faila confides to her young captor that she has taken the liberty of relating in detail his crimes to her local priest, albeit without divulging Santi's name: "Mire si le voy a contar que lo tengo encerrado en el baño. No. A quién se le ocurre. Le conté que me había hecho amiga de un chico de la villa, de catorce años, un chico buenísimo pero que padecía un problema muy grave: no sólo ya había tenido relaciones sexuales con su propia hermana, sino que afirmaba estar enamorado de ella" (199). Just minutes later Faila makes a benevolent proposal to Santi: she offers to open the door to the lavatory but only with her priest present. Santi accepts this motion and threatens to falsely proclaim to the cleric his innocence for the assault on Faila as well as decry his two days of confinement. Faila responds to these threats with a discourse that is strikingly analogous to that of Giménez's in *Cuentas pendientes* concerning promiscuous sexual behavior by Argentina's youth. In her own way and with a marked condemnatory tone, she strongly censures sexual misconduct in Argentina, with a distinct focus on consensual or coercive sexual intercourse between underage Argentine youths as well as incest:

-Cómo le va a creer a usted que tiene catorce años, que quiso robarme y que, encima, afirma estar enamorado de su propia hermana. A propósito, nunca le pregunté qué edad tiene ella. - Es una nena. Y usted es un animal, si me permite el comentario. - Que antes haya estado con otros muchachos, no significa que no sea una nena. Con trece añitos tendría que estar jugando a las muñecas, todavía. Pobrecita, me da mucha lástima. Qué sabe, usted. - Dice eso porque es un enfermo. Seguro que hay alguno de esos muchachos que la quiere bien, que no pretende aprovecharse sólo de su cuerpo. Límites. Nadie les pone límites a ustedes. (200)

Very conspicuously standing out in this suggestive passage is the question of licentious sexual relations (whether forced or consensual) between adolescents in Argentina along with those between persons so closely related that they are forbidden by law to marry, or in this case between consanguineous siblings. As noted in the quotation, Faila dually points out and harshly anathematizes the incestuous relationship between Santi and his sister as well as Margarita's apparent promiscuous sexual behavior. At a subsequent moment Faila provides a key indicator of this behavior: "Margarita, o como se llame, todavía es muy joven, la pobrecita, quién sabe, en una de esas está a tiempo de cambiar, de convertirse en una mujer honorable" (237). Moreover, in respect to Santi's sister, Jeanmaire's protagonist makes a rhetorical argument that closely parallels that of Kohan's main character in *Cuentas pendientes*. Like Giménez, Faila employs the analogy of playfully innocent (and presumably chaste) adolescent girls of former decades contrasted with the sexual licentiousness and abuse she perceives in twenty-first century Argentina to underscore what appears to be radically shifting moral/ethical standards in modern society. Faila reinforces her moralistic homily, as it were, with the stern allegation that Argentina's youth are devoid of "limits" apropos of restraints and limitations pertaining to sex.

In his essayist work *La resistencia* (2000) Ernesto Sábato denounced what he himself has perceived as pervasive immorality, expounding below on what he holds as a contemporary worldwide deterioration of certain moralistic values from the time of his youth in Argentina circa 1920-1940. Here he candidly enumerates a litany of virtues and values that in his estimation have largely fallen into decline in recent decades:

La vida de los hombres se centraba en valores espirituales hoy casi en desuso,

como la dignidad, el desinterés, el estoicismo del ser humano frente a la adversidad. Estos grandes valores, como la honestidad, el honor, el gusto por las cosas bien hechas, el respeto por los demás, no eran algo excepcional, se los hallaba en la mayoría de las personas. ¿De dónde se desprendía su valor, su coraje ante la vida? (47-48)

With no reference to any religious sects, dogmas, or ethics systems, Sábato argues for the reality of a degradation of several traditional values taught and practiced by adherents of the world's major religions as well as aesthetes/agnostics alike. He labels these virtues as "los valores trascendentes y comunitarios" (44), such as selflessness, honesty, honor, and respect for others, while simultaneously highlighting from a nonsectarian perspective a spiritual component to these ideals that have supposedly been lost. In essence, from the vantage point of a bygone era, Sábato endeavors to underscore a modern-day dissolution of values many would view as wholesome and beneficial to society. In his *Pobre patria mía* (2009), Aguinis makes a similar argument to that of Sábato's, while confining his remarks exclusively to Argentina circa the turn of the millennium:

La Argentina no ha salido del Tercer Mundo. Pero aún: algunas porciones corresponden al Cuarto y al Quinto, como si nos hubiésemos mudado al África subsahariana. Ciertas franjas parecen del Primero, con gente bien vestida que luce exquisitos modales, pero prevalecen la decadencia, el clima de dolor, la rabia, el desencanto. Este descenso abarca la economía, la política, la educación, las relaciones sociales y los valores. (88)

In a scathing attack on Argentina's overarching moral environs that coincides with the settings of the novels before us,

Aguinis reprobates this environment while extending his rebuke to other facets of Argentine society. Indeed, Aguinis's unforgiving assault on the decline of Argentine moral values serves as a conclusive nonfictional foundation for the themes in Kohan's and Jeanmaire's works. At another moment in his text, Aguinis again appears to theoretically corroborate said narratives as he assails the moral declination of his fellow citizens: "A nuestra pobre patria la hemos tironeado hacia la decadencia. Una gran decadencia que algunos tienen aún la desfachatez de negar" (184). In a similar contextual vein that includes an assertion of generational relevancy, Giardinelli also provides theory for the literary works in question: "el rebaje ético que es evidente en la sociedad argentina contemporánea (y que también se advierte entre los jóvenes) deriva directamente de que a las últimas generaciones no se les enseñó la importancia de la Ética" (422). These assessments of Argentina's moralistic and ethical milieu near the turn of the century are distinctively linked to the thesis of this study, which consists of different types of moral degeneration in Argentine society as narrated in two contemporary novels, primarily from the perspective of the elderly.

I turn again to *Más liviano que el aire*, which presents an appropriate concluding point. In reference to the previously examined narration of the murders of two teenage girls, the protagonist Faila makes a profound statement on this crime that shifts to another matter of significance for the entire nation. After describing some facts and unanswered questions of the homicides, she goes on to divulge what she views as the essential root cause of many of the country's troubles as she forcefully affirms to Santi:

A mí me parece que ya es tarde para las preguntas, que el mundo está demasiado podrido como para salvarlo con buenas intenciones. Es muy tarde. Se tendría que haber hecho algo antes, cuando las

costumbres empezaron a relajarse. Ahora ya no se puede hacer nada. Las chicas sólo quieren hacerse famosas, mostrar sus desnudeces. A nadie le importa nada, todos quieren divertirse, pasársela bien y punto. Sólo se lamentan cuando ocurre alguna desgracia, como la que acaba de ocurrir. Es un desastre. Mire con lo que me sale. ¿Acaso no le importa lo que le conté? Ve, por eso estamos como estamos, porque a nadie le importa nada de lo que le pasa al prójimo. Se han perdido todos los valores. (147)

Adding to other declarations made by herself as well as Giménez in *Cuentas pendientes*, Faila advances what is likely her most assertive claim in the entire text as it refers to a correlative relationship between the different social ills depicted in the novel, to include physical violence, and an outright loss of beneficent values. I use the term “beneficent” expansively to include those modes of conduct or virtues that, as attested by Sábato, encompass the “great values” that tend to foster harmonious coexistence among human beings as well as the avoidance of different societal maladies. Thus, as we can deduce from both narratives under discussion, they incontrovertibly share some common intertextual themes. As has been affirmed and demonstrated, my comparative analysis reveals two prominent questions in these novels. First, to reiterate my introductory remarks, both works graphically portray and problematize certain aspects of post-dictatorship Argentina, which, in truth, could be characterized to varying degrees as traumas suffered by the nation’s citizenry. Second, after careful scrutiny of several passages it is evident that the elderly protagonists in both texts propound an unequivocal link between problematic national issues and the concepts of morality and ethics.

The novels before us present fictitious yet plausible depictions of a diverse

assortment of behaviors that arguably many of Argentina’s populace would consider unethical or immoral. In view of their speculative though very clear and detailed portrayal of these variedly questionable behaviors, Kohan and Jeanmaire achieve compelling novelistic representations of these issues, many of which have been substantiated by a body of historians and theorists. Indeed, given their subject matter these novels can and should be integrated into the corpus of narratives hypothesized by Drucaroff as exhibiting the “social traumas” and “unresolved conflicts” experienced in Argentine society after the demise of its last dictatorship. What’s more, both works clearly represent many of the theories posed by Bleichmar. Further, Kohan and Jeanmaire integrate an additional factor into the circumstances surrounding the two protagonists’ blunt rebukes of the state of several components of Argentine society. By denouncing the prevalent immorality they perceive with an air of generational condescension, the elderly characters go so far as to censure the very *ethos* or rather the behavioral modes and characteristics of many Argentines, including the nation’s youth, at the turn of the new millennium. From this specific standpoint, the novels put forth a desolate image of the moral and ethical standards of much of the Argentine populace of the time. Both texts thus provide absorbing accounts of these matters as they pertain to Argentina and beyond.

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