Prison and Covid-19 in Argentina through the eyes of Twitter users

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Abstract

In Argentina, overcrowded conditions and poor sanitation that exist in many prisons across the country threatened to contribute to the spread of COVID-19, increase mortality rates, and place the health system at high risk of collapse. In response, between March and May 2020, the Argentine government ordered the transfer of some prison inmates to home imprisonment, thus implementing international health organisations' guidelines. The conditions of the inmates and the crisis that the prison sector was experiencing, became a central issue in the public agenda during the first months of the pandemic.

In this paper, I analyse the social attitudes of Twitter users, employing critical discourse analysis tools to explore the cognitive social patterns that enable the reproduction of whiteness and its exclusion practices. Drawing on a broad sample of 16,836 tweets spanning from January to July 2020, I focus on those tweets that discuss the release of prisoners due to COVID-19.

This analysis unmasks the conflictive relationship between the sector of the population invested in the idea of a nation linked to supposed European origins and those who deviate from this national myth. Consequently, the tweets operate as a cultural manifestation on whiteness in the context of an profound humanitarian crisis. They compose a sort of escape valve favoured by the anonymity and the affordances of the medium, where racism, dehumanization, eliminationism, and contempt for otherness are gruesomely exposed.

Keywords: prison; protest; COVID-19; whiteness; Argentina; Twitter.

Context

In Argentina, overcrowded conditions and poor sanitation that exist in many prisons across the country threatened to contribute to the spread of COVID-19, increase mortality rates, and place the health system at high risk of collapse. In response, between March and May 2n020, the Argentine government ordered the transfer of some prison inmates to home imprisonment, thus implementing international health organisations' guidelines (Alderete et al., 2020; Gauna & Sanchez, 2020). The conditions of the inmates and the crisis that the prison sector was experiencing, became a central issue in the public agenda during the first months of the pandemic.

Prisons in Argentina, as in other countries like Brazil, Colombia or Mexico (Belmiro, 2014, Londoño et al, 2020), are overcrowded; for example, "In some

jurisdictions such as Buenos Aires (SPB), this situation was notoriously aggravated with a population of 42,460 detainees, which represents 40% of the total prison population of the country and with an overpopulation index of 110%" (Gauna & Sanchez, 2020, pp. 5 & 7). As a result, sanitary conditions are far from acceptable; there is little ventilation, there are shared dorms instead of individual cells, and prisoners take turns sleeping due to lack of beds (Inadi, 2020, Fahsbender, 2020).

In this context, the Argentine government and judicial institutions considered and adopted measures and recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to limit contagions and to protect the lives of inmates and their families. These measures included the dissemination of information on prevention and sanitation to the prison population, security personnel, and to visitors. Additionally, hygiene products were provided to the prison population, and alternative means of communication were used to reduce the transport of inmates for court proceedings (Alderete et al., 2020; Gauna & Sanchez, 2020, Fahsbender, 2020, Fahsbender & Palacios, 2020).

As the pandemic progressed and worsened, collective activities such as educational classes and visits were suspended. At the same time, in different prisons around the country, growing protests demanded the implementation of the measures suggested by WHO, OHCHR, SPT and IACHR. On April 24, 2020, after a 17-hour protest in the Villa Devoto Federal Penitentiary Complex— popularly known as Devoto's Prison— inmates and government representatives reached an agreement that would be replicated in all federal prisons, and later in the provincial penal systems. As a result, the government created crisis committees involving the inmates and drew up lists of inmates who were at higher risk of severe Covid-19 illness, as a result of chronic diseases, or pregnancy in the case of female inmates. Officials also explored alternatives to prison sentences, including options such as house arrests, temporary exits, assisted freedom, and semi-freedom. These alternatives were aimed mainly at pregnant women, people over 60 years old, people who were housed with their children under the age of six, prison inmates with sentences of less than three years, people who were insulin-dependent diabetic patients, or who suffered from immunosuppression, chronic heart, or kidney failure. People eligible for these alternatives to prison sentences made up a significant percentage of the prison population. In the Federal Criminal System for example, almost 10% of inmates met those requirements —around 1,200 people (Alderete et al., 2020, Infobae, 2020). However, only 112 people were actually released from prison or obtained the benefit of home arrest, assisted release, or parole (Alderete et al., 2020). Similarly, in the Penal System of the Province of Buenos Aires, less than 2% of the inmates —a total of 800 people— were given alternatives to prison sentences (Inadi, 2020)

As a result, tensions around the inmates' protests and human rights concerns escalated in public discourse. It was against this background that I collected my samples from public Twitter exchanges, with the aim of analysing the social imaginary that shaped these discourses.

Twitter and tweets

In the current cyber public sphere, people are eager to participate through tweeting, reacting, favouriting, reading, or posting and assume their interactions as part of their socialization processes. Then, studying social media and Twitter in particular provides a sort of window on contemporary societies (Puschmann et al., 2014). In that sense, I contend that social media, along with other virtual artefacts, must be incorporated for studying culture and society in recognition of the new possibilities provided by social media APIs (Application Programming Interface), where the data available for research purposes were collected while the users were socializing online. In consequence, according to Veltri (2020), studying big data obtained through Twitter API amplifies the scope to understanding complex phenomena happening in Social Media by incorporating new instances related to behavioural information with minor conscious intervention of the subject studied. To put it clearly, traditional research relies on testimonies and self-reported data of the subjects studied, allowing them to answer according to conscient analysis of the situation. Meanwhile, APIs collect data when the subjects are performing their daily routine, thus diminishing data manipulation by subjects studied.

Agreeing with Puschmann et al. (2014) that the expression style in Twitter is closer to oral than written communication and, consequently, people write as they speak; I argue then that that the content and form of tweets inevitably reflect people's social and personal circumstances, class formation, prejudices, fears, and hopes. Furthermore, cultural conceptions linked to ethnicity configure and shape the use that communities make of Twitter (Brock, 2012). On the other hand, according to Marwick & boyd (2010), Twitter users write for their imagined audiences and try to maintain certain authenticity between their off-line self and their virtual persona. In the case analysed here, I claim that it is possible to recognize certain concepts related to the people deprived of their liberty that the speakers share with their imagined audience. In that way, it is possible to comprehend certain social, moral, and aesthetic values they attribute to prison inmates. In other words, Twitter users try to establish links with people who share similar ideas, racial frames and beliefs (Brock, 2012); while they contradict those who do not share the same conceptions.

In Argentina, Twitter is placed in 4th place of preference preceded by WhatsApp Groups, Facebook, Instagram (Carrier, 2019) with over 5 million users (Kemp, 2021) whose ages correspond mostly to Generation Z[1] and millennials of middle

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[1] Generation Z or GenZ are the cohort born between 1995 and 2010 whose older members are now beginning to integrate into the job market. They are the first generation who spent their

and upper-classes from urban areas. Such characteristics clearly distinguish Twitter from Facebook whose use "tends to grow as the socioeconomic level decreases" (Carrier, 2019, para. 4). At the same time, Argentine Twitter's users seems to follow news accounts to be constantly informed on local and national political topics (TelcosMedia, 2019) which leads us to think that a large part of those who participate in Twitter belong to the middle and upper-classes who, according to vanDijk (1994), have the ability to handle multiple discourses that impact government policies. On the other hand, the privacy policies of Twitter favoured certain anonymity on the user and do not allow to identify for sure who is behind a Twitter account. However, due to the use of the language and words, the events depicted, and certain recurring notions linked with social class that is possible to read in the tweets, I suggest that users that appear in my analysed sample correspond mostly to millennials and GenZ of the dominant classes, or at least they diverge from the most vulnerable classes.

Whiteness and Twitter

Historically, since Colonialism, Argentina as well as other societies, was organized by the hierarchies established by whiteness as a system and an ideology that promoted a supposed superiority of certain social agents over others. Consequently, the privileges were distributed among the wealthy and dominant groups of the political class descending from European conquerors, the clergy, the nobility, and the petit bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, indigenous people, mestizos and Africans were marginalized, devoid of wealth and means of production. This way of structuring society —with modifications and negotiations— was inherited by contemporary societies. In Anibal Quijano's words 'The 'social classes', in Latin America, have 'color'" (2000, p. 241) and compose a complex phenomenon where race and class are integrated. In this way, many times classist attitudes hide racism (Hernández, 2015; Moreno Figueroa, 2010).

Considering all that is possible to know about Twitter users in Argentina and understanding that whiteness as the dominant system penetrates all cultural aspects including discourses, I argue that in the tweets collected whiteness attitudes emerge in contrast to the 'Other'. Agreeing with Geler (2016), Kaminsky (2009) and Gordillo (2016) this 'Other' is located —discursively— closer to blackness and represent the opposite of the whiteness expectations linked to the ideas of progress and civilization. Because whiteness in Argentina functions as an umbrella race that embraces all that is outside of ethnical blackness, being 'black' in Argentina is not really about colour, or physical appearance, but it has political, geographical, class, cultural, and moral implications that are rejected by the dominant sectors of society (Alberto & Elena, 2016; Geler, 2016; Gordillo, 2016; Kaminsky, 2009; Keeling, 2017; Reid Andrews, 2016). These sectors use all possible means to separate themselves

entire life in the Internet era so companies are starting to explore their consumer habits that may differ from millennials' (Entrepreneur Staff, 2020).

from the marginal, from the black, and from those who do not belong to their group that they envision inserted in whiteness.

Then, through collecting the tweets that compose the sample for this research, I was seeking the trace of whiteness in tweets as cultural artifacts able to be analysed using the lenses provided by Critical Discourse Analyses. Doing so, I expect to shed light on the functioning of whiteness in twenty-first century Argentine society.

Methods

The original sample of 16,836 tweets collected during January to July of 2020 — from which I selected the 465 tweets discussing the release of prisoners due to COVID-19 on which this study focused— was dedicated to exploring how whiteness manifests in tweets from Argentine users. To obtain a sample from the bigdata collected by Twitter API, I used a Twitter data scraping tool (Giroux, 2020) and collected tweets that contained the keyword *'negros de mierda'* that can be translated as 'shitty blacks'. This phrase implies the use of vernacular derogatory language about non-white people that is common in Argentina. From a larger sample, I then filtered all the tweets that included the words "*cárcel* [jail]" and "*presos* [inmates]". As a result, the 465 tweets of the subsample contained the association between '*negros de mierda'* + jail/inmates, and some of them include associations with COVID-19 or the prison protests. Thus, my research demonstrates how '*negros de mierda*' was associated with the prison releases. Then, I analysed these tweets using critical discourse analysis as outlined by Teun van Dijk (1994) and André Brock (2016). I adapted their methods to explore characteristics salient to my research and contexts.

Using the subsample of 465 tweets I generated a word-cloud which gave me a birds-eye view of shared topics and words that appeared in the tweets. These topics helped me to capture the general tone of the discussion in Twitter.

According to the word-cloud (Figure 1) the most recurring words are:

- blacks [487]
- inmates [246]
- jail [72]
- rights [65]
- people [44]
- Devoto (that is the short name of one prison establishment) [34]
- kill them [32]

Figure 1 Word-cloud by Orange Software (Demsar et al., 2013)

The collected comments which I will discuss below expose racism, dehumanization, eliminationism, and white supremacy; in short, people expressed contempt for otherness and the socially marginalised strata of society in the context of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and its consequential protests. The shared themes in the tweets reflect how whiteness operates through exclusion practices. Then, the tweets reproduce a cultural manifestation of whiteness that display elements that are strongly rooted in cultural practices and deposited in national values.

Discussion

Killing with words

Of the total sub-sample, 146 tweets (32%) contain the words "kill" or "die" with recurring comments such as, "*¿Por qué no los matan?* [Why don't they kill them?]" or, "*se tienen que morir* [they have to die]" or "*hay que matarlos* [they have to be killed]", thus introducing eliminationism discourses. According to Neiwert, eliminationism is "a politic and a culture that rejects dialogue and the democratic exchange of ideas in favour of the pursuit of outright elimination of the opposite side, either through suppression, exile, and ejection or extermination" (2009, p. 11). This suggestion contained in the tweets that some entity, maybe 'the society', should eliminate people that are 'uncomfortable' must be historically contextualized.

The policy of state terrorism during Argentina's last military dictatorship (1976-1983) had left deep marks on the country's social fabric. The regime's alleged enemies of the nation dubbed '*elementos subersivos'* [subversive elements] were imprisoned, kidnapped, disappeared, and, in many cases, were executed by their captors and buried in nameless mass graves. Their recently born children were taken and resettled with regime-friendly foster families to avoid the 'ideological contamination and chaos' allegedly spread by their biological parents (Teubal, 2003). According to Gordillo (2016), the military dictatorship was dedicated to honouring white Argentina, so they treated the 'subversive elements' with the same violence with which the government treated Amerindians and mixed-race gauchos during the national state organization of Argentina in 19th Century.

> During the dictatorship years, officials emphasized that the violence unleashed by the military regime was a spatially cleansing force, which hoped to rid Argentina of "*elementos ajenos al ser nacional* [elements alien to the national being]." Because this terror sought to prevent revolution and to discipline the subaltern classes in a sweeping fashion, it unleashed violence regardless of the victims' skin color. But the state violence of the late 1970s also sought to whiten space through the destruction of places of perceived barbarism. (Gordillo, 2016, p. 253)

Then, Gordillo emphasized that whiteness is spatially situated and that can be true in relation to the tweets analysed here, where jail seems to be the place for blackness as if committing a crime was not typical of whites. Then, if jail is a space of blackness, getting rid of inmates seems desirable for those speaking through tweets.

One example reads, "*Que negros de mierda los de la carcel de Devoto. Un tiro y al rio, si total no sirven para nada* [Those shitty blacks in Devoto prison. One shot and into the river, they are useless]" (tweet 5680). This particular tweet that talks about killing inmates and throwing them into the river, are chilling reminders of the so-called 'death flights'[2] of 1976-1977, where military aircrafts threw unconscious but alive political prisoners into the Río de la Plata and the Argentine Sea, where they drowned. Some of their bodies were subsequently found on the Argentine and Uruguayan coastlines and were then buried in nameless graves (Llorente, 2021).

In the sub-sample of tweets, one of the other most named technologies through which Twitter users imagined eliminating people was through the use of weapons, such as firearms or bombs. One tweet read, "*esos negros de mierda que violan, matan y roban nunca cambian hay q ponerles una bomba en la carcel* [Those negros de mierda that rape, kill and steal never change, we should bomb them in jail]" [tweet 4056]. This tweet makes it clear that in the eyes of its author, people deprived of their liberty should not have any possibility of social reintegration, and that they should not be valued as citizens.

I argue that this eliminationism is already rooted in an Argentine social imaginary due to the legacies of the dictatorships and the traumatic experiences that shape ways of dealing with people that are considered as being on the margins of society, reducing them to the point that they are not considered human beings anymore.

'They are not people'

Gamarnik (2017) explained that during the last dictatorship various state outlets, the established media, and other institutions, supported an ideological mechanism that allowed to discursively disconnect the 'subversive elements' from their human nature. Likewise, according to the *Technical Report of the Discrimination Observatory* (Inadi, 2020), at the start of the prison protests, the headlines referred to them as 'riots' or 'revolts', implying that violence was an inherent condition of protest where the protesters were inmates. In that sense, the Inadi's Report showed that written press played an important role in

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[2] In October 2020 a trial started that focused on the death flights "On this occasion, the prosecution seeks to prove the existence of the "death flights" operated from Campo de Mayo, a military base in the northeast of the province of Buenos Aires where another clandestine detention center operated, to convict those who commanded that operation" (Llorente, 2021, para. 8).

perpetuating stigmatization of people involved in criminal proceedings. The Inadi's Report's findings echo van Dijk's assertion (1994) that the mass media contributes to the creation of discourses that establish and reinforce dominant socio-cognitive patterns for perceiving of marginalised groups and people.

These headlines seemed to suggest that people who are being processed by the penal systems do not have the right to protest. However, according to Inadi's Report people subjected to criminal proceedings are guaranteed to retain all their human rights by the Argentine National Constitution; they have the right "to work, to study, to health, to live in a healthy and clean environment, to their personal safety and integrity, life, dignity and non-discrimination, regardless of their procedural situation" (Inadi, 2020, p. 4) . Thus, in theory, the only restriction would be freedom of movement —although the imprisonment conditions impede the fully exercise of all their rights in practice. In any case, Inadi's Report suggested that by using certain terminology to define people deprived of their liberty during 2020 protests, the headlines of the written press tended to reduce their humanity and contribute to implant a fixed idea that they are not subjects protected by law.

The idea that inmates should not have any human rights also appeared in the analysed tweets. Therefore, anyone who commits a crime is denied the possibility of being fully human and is associated with the savage and the uncivilized. For example, one tweet read, "*Los presos pidiendo derechos ajajaja no ven que ustedes no tienen negros de mierda, no son personas* [Prisoners asking for rights ahahaha. don't you see that you haven't got any? *Negros de mierda*, you are not persons" (tweet 4808).

Many speakers insisted that inmates should be stripped off their human rights because they committed crimes. According to these speakers' socio-cognitive pattern, imprisonment is not enough; the inmates must continue to pay for their offenses with being deprived of their personal dignity. "*"No queremos morir en una cárcel", dice el trapo q colgaron los presos en el motín. Me están jodiendo q los van a escuchar?? Xq no lo pensaron antes de entrar, NEGROS DE MIERDA!!!!* ["We don't want to die in a jail," says the rag that the prisoners hung up during the riot. Are they kidding me? Will anyone listen to them? Why didn't they think about it before they went (to jail), YOU NEGROS DE MIERDA !!!!]" (tweet 5456). In their view, inmates have no right to protest during the COVID-19 emergency, and therefore they have no right to health; the underlying idea seems to be that prison must be a sort of hell for those who broke the rules.

However, this dehumanization is even more complex because inmates are associated with a certain way of being and living. In the tweets cited in this article, being a prisoner is clearly equated with being black, which in the Argentine social imaginary has its own meaning. In the tweets collected, whiteness only emerges in contrast to the 'Other'. Being black in Argentina is not only about colour, or physical appearance, but it also has political, geographical, classist, cultural, and moral implications that are rejected by the dominant sectors of society. These sectors use all possible means to separate

themselves from the marginal, from the black, and from those who do not belong to their group that they envision as inserted in whiteness.

In that sense, to call someone '*negro de mierda'* is highly pejorative and violent because the term carries a lot of symbolism. To define it quickly, generally those who are classified as '*negros de mierda'* are suspected of living in *villas miseria* [shanty town] or at least in poor neighbourhoods. They are stereotyped to listen to urban tropical national music (cumbia[3] o cuarteto[4]) and to go to places[5] where people listen to that kind of music. They are also stereotyped to have precarious jobs, or to be unemployed and live on social assistance[6], using welfare money to spend on consumer goods and on parties. They are imagined as alcoholics and drug users, as criminals and thieves that procreate many children who consume state resources. As a corollary they are defined as generally lazy and are accused of being unwilling to work. Finally, sometimes they are stereotyped as being from neighbouring countries and having indigenous and black features. Geler described these stereotypes as "*popular negritud*" [popular blackness] and representing "a social and cultural stigma against mestizo and low-income social groups" (2016, p. 220)

 In more general parlance, I claim that anyone who suffers an inconvenience of any severity with an individual, state institution, or organization might exclaim the phrase "¡*qué negros de mierda*! [Those *negros de mierda*!]." The phrase colloquially means that these people have experienced something negative in their life, or that they have observed something negative. That is, it is a figure of speech with derogatory connotations that always hinges on otherness. This otherness is projected towards people who occupy different spaces and whose habits and customs differ from those who assume themselves to be 'white.' This self-recognition as 'white' comes from what Kaminsky called "the myth of a monocultural Argentina" (2009, p. 1) that was constructed by Argentine elites during 19th Century using material and discursive means. In that sense, Argentine elites —mostly based in the capital city— imagined the true Argentine citizen as cosmopolitan, white, and with European origins. They concentrated on displacing the native population and making the African population invisible, forcing them into poverty and marginalization, denying their ancestral roots, even in national censuses, where ethnic origins different from what was posited by whiteness did not appear until 2010. The result was the persistent idea that Argentines are basically Europeans 'transplanted' onto Argentine soil that mixed with each other, achieving a kind of 'melting pot' of 'European races'.

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[3] "*Cumbia* music, a tropical genre imported from Colombia became extremely successful in 1990s Argentina, especially among the urban working-class" (Aguiló, 2014, p. 178)

[4] *Cuarteto* is a genre created in Cordoba in the 1940s, a mix between pasodoble and tarantella and tropical sounds. It engendered a 'popular' or working-class dance subculture as can be appreciated in the movie "De caravana" (Ruíz, 2010).

[5] *Bailes* or *bailantas*, or concerts of those musical styles where people dance.

[6] It generates conflicts with the middle-class over the payment of taxes and the use of the proceeds.

During the 20th century, the middle-classes and the institutions and state systems kept this belief alive through all the instances of discourse —books, educative system, artworks, main history narratives, mass media, among other mechanisms. Consequently, being white became an inherent characteristic of being Argentine (Adamovsky & Arza, 2012; Alberto & Elena, 2016; Geler, 2016; Gordillo, 2016; Joseph, 2000; Kaminsky, 2009; Keeling, 2017; Reid Andrews, 2016).

According to Geler (2016), whiteness in Argentina compounds a complex set of behaviours, assumptions and values that represent what is socially acceptable in relation with European ancestry and capitalism. For example, in my analysed sample one person had tweeted: "*En un motín de bs as los presos rompieron la cárcel y los familiares aplaudiéndolos desde afuera , que negros de mierda* [In a riot in Buenos Aires the prisoners caused damage to the jail and the relatives applauded them from the outside, those *negros de mierda*!]" (tweet 5558). The inmates and their families are labelled in the aforementioned derogatory ways because 'popular' blackness represents deviant ways of being uneducated and savage, while whiteness is considered normal, civilized, and obedient of the social rules.

'All of them are murderers and rapists'

Governments around the world confronted the problem of prisons becoming potential breeding grounds for the Covid virus. Yet, in Argentina, the Fernández-led government action generated strong opposition and *cacerolazos*[7] by outraged citizens, who demonstrated against an allegedly 'massive release of prisoners'. They were inspired by press headlines that criticised the government's actions, alleging that they failed to guarantee the safety of victims of past crimes and potential future encounters with their assailants (Fahsbender, 2020; Fahsbender & Palacios, 2020; Inadi, 2020; Infobae, 2020; Redacción AN / AG, 2020; Redacción La Nación, 2020).

According to the tweets analysed here, the concern was focused on the assumption that the most frequent crimes committed by inmates, in addition to robbery, are rape and murder. This attitude is apparent in tweet 5341, "*Estos negros de mierda no tienen reinserción en la sociedad. Por estas cosas, la pena de muerte (violadores y asesinos) deberia aplicarse, para no desbordar las cárceles* [There is no reintegration into society for these *negros de mierda*. For these

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[7] *Cacerolazos* are protests where citizens make noise by hitting pots and pans to attract the attention of institutions and governments. According to Telechea, *cacerolazos* represent "a type of demonstration with peaceful characteristics. Its particularity lies in the symbolic concentration in a specific element, in this case, an instrument of cooking. In this way, the carrying of pans seeks to give a specific meaning to a manifestation that alludes to the right to life through the need to eat (2006, p. 142). According to the author, these protests initiated in 1982 by working-class families to which the petit bourgeois later joined. Over time it became one of the forms of protest preferred by the Argentine middle-class and they were massive during 2001 politic-economic crisis.

things, the death penalty (rapists and murderers) should be applied, so as not to overflow the prisons]". In reality and despite the eliminationist desires of this Twitte user, less than 15% of the inmates were convicted for crimes related to murders (9.7%) or sexual offenses (4.5%) (CELIV, 2017). In other words, Argentina in general has a low homicide rate —6.6 per 100,000 inhabitants— but it has a high robbery rate (53.7%) —though most of these convictions are for attempted robbery—(CELIV, 2017; Pardo, 2016). For manyArgentines, insecurity tends to be about property related crime, according to a survey carried out between 2010 and 2015 by the Argentine Catholic University Observatory (UCA). The study found that although only about 35% of those surveyed had suffered a criminal act, about 85% persistently felt insecurity related to crime. On the other hand, people from the lower social strata were more likely to suffer criminal acts, and less likely to report them. In turn, they have fewer material and personal tools to address the traumatic psychological consequences of those crimes (Muratori & Rodríguez Espínola, 2016).

This feeling of insecurity and the idea that the government is incapable of providing effective justice is evident throughout the analysed sub-sample, suggesting that the sentiment of powerlessness and impunity comes from structural junctures that remain unresolved:

> *Esto es peronismo en su máxima expresión, solo derechos y libertades para los delincuentes, los ciudadanos quédense encerrados y no vayan a trabajar, sino los multan y les abren una causa. ESTO ES LO QUE VOTARON NEGROS DE MIERDA* [This is Peronism at its finest, only rights and freedoms for criminals. Citizens stay locked up and do not go to work, otherwise you will be fined and processed. THIS IS WHAT YOU *NEGROS DE MIERDA HAVE* VOTED FOR] (tweet 4393).

As is evident in the tweet, the speaker is discouraged by the measures of the current government and accuses the *negros de mierda* of having voted for the reduction of the rights of 'citizens'. In this sense, as I pointed out above, inmates and *negros de mierda* do not appear to be citizens to the authors of the tweets.

On the other hand, when the speaker points out "this is Peronism at its finest", he/she suggests that Peronism as a political force never defended the right of the "citizens" and, on the contrary, punishes them. In this sense, it must be remembered that Peronism, although it is a movement that encompasses the entire political spectrum from left to right, has historically been associated with followed by the working-class, while the middle and upper-class opted for opposition parties. In this way, what the speaker calls "citizens' refers to those belonging to the white and dominant strata, and not those from the 'non-white working-class'.

Dissenting opinions

However, in these highly polarized discourses there is minimal room for dissent. In a minority of tweets, the speakers point out how criminal behaviours are often racialized. According to the author of tweet 4353, the inmates are imagined as poor and non-white while felonies committed by white people are frequently invisibilized by public opinion.

> *Muchos hablan de los presos, como si solo hubiera homicidas, violadores y "negros de mierda". No hablan de los empresarios que estafan, de los rugbier que mataron en manada, no hablan de los que evaden impuestos como Macri. Ustedes no odian a los presos Odian los pobres*. [Many speak of the prisoners, as if there were only murderers, rapists and "negros de mierda". They do not speak of the businessmen who defraud, of the rugby players who have killed in hordes, they do not speak of those who evade taxes like (former president) Macri. You don't hate the prisoners; you hate the poor.] (tweet 4353)

In this sense, this speaker frames the general public opinion about people deprived of liberty and points out that the vulnerable classes are not the only ones capable of committing crimes. However, according to the speaker's criteria, public opinion rarely associates the middle- and upper-class with blackness.

Curiously, this type of dissident ideas in the analysed sample are seldom embraced as in the tweet 4353. However, they are cited by the speakers who do associate popular blackness with jail, accusing those who empathize with the human rights of the prison inmates of being irrational and naïve "*hay gente q defiende lo indefendible esos negros de mierda que violan,matan y roban nunca cambian* [There are people who defend the indefensible, those *negros de mierda* who rape, kill and steal never change]" (tweet 4056). Here the speaker is raising once again the impossibility of social reintegration of prisoners deprived of their liberty that I mentioned before.

In turn, some speakers claimed that defending the rights of prison inmates portrays the typical hypocrisy of people who lack experience in the everyday reality of the country:

> *Me cruce con varias personas que tenian la bandera de defender a los presos, a los que roban y te venian con 123229 argumentos, hasta que esos mismos que defendia les robaron sus iPhone y cambiaron el discurso a: negros de mierda, muertos los quiero... hipocresía*. [I met several people who defended the prisoners, those who steal, and they came to you with 123229 arguments. Until those very ones they defended stole their iPhone. At that time, they changed the speech to: '*negros de mierda*, I want you dead!' ... hypocrisy. (tweet 4958)

The selection of the stolen object made by the speaker of the ABCD tweet is noteworthy. Carrying an Iphone represents in Argentina a certain purchasing

power and a social class. Clearly, the protagonists depicted in this tweet are not *negros de mierda*, but members of the accommodated classes who, due to social inexperience, dare to defend the 'enemies' of the way of life as outlined by whiteness.

In that sense the discussion is always circular among members of the same imagined community who occupy certain places in the upper layers of the social pyramid. They are never directly arguing with the '*negros de mierda',* but, rather, they are talking about the *negros de mierda* who are not on Twitter but in the places that whiteness has assigned them. In the case analyzed here, that place is jail.

Conclusions

Although there is a heterogeneous audience, my research shows how Twitter constitutes one of the spaces where whiteness is manifested and reproduced. On this Twitter's sample, those who consider themselves members of the true white and European Argentina linked to the idea of order and progress, use their tweets to differentiate themselves from those inserted in 'popular' blackness. In this arena, people deprived of their liberty were associated with the ideas of anti-progress, chaos, and barbarism. Those racist structures of domination practiced through discourse act as barriers to social advance and integration of the inmates depriving them of any possibility of integrating as citizens with full rights.

The sampled tweets also revealed how stigmatization and prejudice are so normalized that they are almost not questioned. That is the true power of whiteness as an ideology; it is turned invisible and to unmask its mechanisms requires an ability to carry out an extensive deconstructive exercise. This paper aimed to shed light on some of these mechanisms and their linkages to a cultural framework. In this sense, each tweet integrates meaning and symbolisms that define them as cultural artefacts that match the social fabric from which they emerged.

The data represented here then, highlight the importance of analysing discourse, especially in the age of social media, as a manifestation of a social imaginary that condemns those who are not contained into the myth of monocultural Argentina. Nevertheless, activism could benefit from this way of assessing the ideas that underpin public opinion in a tangible way. In that sense, research about whiteness praxis in Argentina were stated previously by other authors; however, this research adds tools to monitor them on new environments offered by social media. With this knowledge, activist groups could create strategies intendent to correct wrong conceptions regarding prison populations.

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About the author

Erika M. Heredia's research explores how national identities are expressed in digital environments, with a special interest in narratives that build a sense of community in social media. She believes that the study of technological tools from a critical point of view provides a path toward social justice, the final purpose of all academic intervention in society. She recently earned her PhD degree in Texts and Technology, University of Central Florida (2021) where she analyzed how Twitter indirectly exposes daily whiteness in users from Mexico and Argentina while explored the role of the United States as symbolic and cultural power over those countries. Her previous studies include a M.A. in Humanistic Studies (Tec. De Monterrey, Mex. 2014) and a B.A. in Audiovisual Communication (UBP, Arg. 2005). For more information, see www.erikamheredia.com / info at erikamheredia.com