



The reconceptualization of agency through ambiguity and contradiction: Salvadoran women narrating unauthorized migration

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SYNOPSIS

This article examines women's understandings of their agency under conditions of extreme oppression, exploring narratives told by Salvadoran migrant women about their hazardous unauthorized journeys to the United States across 2000 miles and three international borders. The analysis focuses on the specific speech practices these women use in creating meaning from their experiences, suggesting that this careful attention elucidates the conceptualizations of agency that undergird the narratives. In telling their stories, the women take up two dominant discourses about migrant agency, weaving these discursive formations together through the use of collective and individual framings. These narrative frameworks constitute and juxtapose overlapping subjectivities, both shared and personal, with differing levels of agentivity and victimization, thereby drawing out the points of conflict between dominant discourses of migrant agency. Through these contradictory and highly particular accounts, the hegemony of dominant discursive formulations is momentarily disrupted, and new conceptualizations of agency are made possible.

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Introduction

Since its inception, feminist scholarship has been centrally concerned with the question of agency, as academics and activists alike have struggled to understand the human capacity for action under conditions of marginalization based on gender, race, class, and other social categorizations. While this debate is still ongoing, a special issue of this journal (Charrad, 2010b) argued for the importance of a nuanced conceptualization of agency for feminist research, one that attends to the fundamental ambiguity of agency. Such “contradictory aspects that cannot easily be disentangled” (Charrad, 2010a, p. 519) are produced by the relationship between agency and coercion, which are fundamentally interconnected in a “dynamic continuum of simultaneity” (Madhok, Phillips, & Wilson, 2013, p. 3). Coercive constraints on agency are historically

and culturally specific (Mahmood, 2001) meaning that determinations of agentivity cannot be made in advance but “must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity” (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 14–15). The interconnection between agency and coercion, as well as the variable nature of their relationship, can be better understood by studying agency under conditions of severe oppression. Madhok (2013) suggests that such a focus leads to a conceptual reworking of agency that emphasizes speech practices, the narratives through which individuals engage with dominant discourses in complex and contradictory ways.

This article takes up Madhok's call, bringing linguistic anthropological insights to bear in analyzing how new understandings of agency emerge through speech practices under conditions of extreme marginalization; I analyze

narratives in which undocumented migrant women recount their long and hazardous overland journeys from El Salvador to the United States across three borders and 2000 miles. From a linguistic anthropological perspective, speech practices are not simply representational; rather, discursive practices constitute action in the world through the production of social meaning. Analysis in this tradition therefore pays close attention to the details of specific speech practices, which are crucial to understanding how particular social meanings of agency are discursively produced (Ahearn, 2000, 2001; Duranti, 2004; Gaudio, 2014; Mills & Jones, 2014).¹ Narrative as a particular type of speech practice has been shown to play a crucial role in the negotiation and construction of subjectivity (Bruner, 1987; Langellier, 1989; Sawin, 1999), particularly for marginalized groups (Bell, 1988; Capps, 1999; Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991; De Fina & King, 2011; Kalcik, 1975; O'Connor, 2000). This focus on subjectivity in the study of narrative “entails a methodological and analytical shift from considering women’s narratives as mere reflections of their experiences...to approaching the narratives as sites of the subject’s formation” (Andrijasevic, 2010, p. 18).

This article therefore analyzes how particular speech practices function in the production of these migrants’ subjectivities, thereby treating narrative as fundamentally a technology of the self that is deployed in processes of subjectification (Foucault, 1982). Feminist readings of Foucault’s later work on subjectivity (1982, 1988) suggest that these theories offer space for a revisitation of agency in the poststructuralist tradition (e.g., Benhabib, 1995, 1999; Lloyd, 1988; Sawicki, 1998). Specifically, power relations often make necessary processes of “creative self-(re)making” (Madhok et al., 2013, p. 44), and although such subjectification must necessarily draw on existing discourses, the outcomes of these processes are unpredictable and may ultimately introduce movement into the field of power relations. In subjectification processes, as Hirschman suggests, “by drawing on multiple discourses at their points of conflict, the dominant discourse can be shifted and altered” (2002, p. 132). Similarly, scholarship in women-of-color feminism argues that tension between multiple subjectivities creates a potent space of paradox from which agency can emerge (Anzaldúa, 1987; Barvosa, 2008; Lugones, 1994).

Drawing on these insights, this article explores how contradictions between existing discourses are mobilized in the subjectification work of narrative speech practices. I situate the analysis of migrant women’s narratives in the context of dominant public discourses on migrant agency, examining how individual narratives draw on these discursive formations in ways that highlight their contradictions. This article demonstrates that the narrators take up binary conceptualizations of migrant agency, juxtaposing and intertwining these contradictory discourses to produce hybrid accounts of their experience of agency under conditions of extreme coercion. These ambiguous new understandings of agency are of course situated within the field of power relations, and underscoring migrants’ agency functions to highlight the freedom of the acted upon, a crucial factor in the maintenance of power relations (Foucault, 1982). Nevertheless, these narrative

speech practices are crucial to promoting new forms of subjectivity, exploring those “secrets, possible freedoms, and inventions” that carry the prospect of change (Foucault, 1988, p. 15). This analysis thus contributes to the academic and activist project of exploring the connection between agency and coercion, demonstrating that a conceptual reworking of agency is not simply an academic issue. Rather, it is of central concern for those who must make meaning of their own lives under conditions of severe oppression; I suggest that paying close and careful attention to how such individuals create subjectivities through their speech practices elucidates more productive conceptualizations of agency.

Undocumented Salvadoran migration to the United States

The material conditions that have created the inequality that drives undocumented Salvadoran migration have emerged from a long and complex history of unequal relations between El Salvador and the United States. Although internal migration and displacement have been the lot of the Salvadoran poor since communally held indigenous lands were confiscated (Landolt, Autler, & Baires, 1999; Menjívar, 2000), external migration to the United States did not emerge as a significant phenomenon until the 1980s. The primary cause for this sudden increase in transnational migration was the Salvadoran civil war, which began in the late 1970s in response to years of military dictatorships and violent repression (Mahler, 1999; Miyares, Wright, Mountz, Bailey, & Jonak, 2003). Billions of dollars of U.S. military aid prolonged the conflict (Carothers, 1991; LeoGrande, 1998), and the scorched-earth tactics promulgated by U.S. military advisors increased the suffering of the rural poor (Todd, 2010; Wood, 2003). To escape the violence, many Salvadorans fled to the United States, where exclusionary immigration laws kept them undocumented or at best gave them temporary legal status (Coutin, 1998, 2007; Menjívar, 2000).

Although the war’s end in 1993 brought hopes for peace, these hopes were quickly dashed by economic and social devastation and continued violence (Moodie, 2011). Once again, U.S. intervention has contributed to this continued destabilization through neoliberal economic policies such as the Central American Free Trade Agreement, which have undercut the livelihoods of rural families (Paris, 2002; Velásquez Carillo, 2010; Wade, 2008). Harsh enforcement and policing strategies in the war on drugs, and now on terror, have counterproductively extended gangs and organized crime within the region (Lopez, Connell, & Kraul, 2004, October 30; McDermott, 2012, January 3; Montaigne, 1999), creating an environment where the threat of extreme violence is part of everyday life. Today, in large part as a direct result of U.S. foreign and trade policy, many Salvadorans see migration as the only viable option for familial survival. Salvadorans are now the fourth largest population of Latinos in the United States, but form the second largest group of undocumented migrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), due to low immigration quotas and visa policies that require proof of substantial wealth.

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