



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.

Dominant discourses on migration in Latin America

In addition to the unjust economic and political structures that produce undocumented migration from El Salvador to the United States, the circulation of dominant discourses also plays a role in constructing the field of power relations within which migrant agency emerges. Such discourses about migration and migrants are prevalent in both sending and receiving societies, but here, I focus on two discourses of that circulate primarily within Latin America. The first of these discourses, which I call the “no choice” discourse, is extremely widespread within the region, appearing in official rhetoric as well as in popular conceptions and everyday conversations (Dick, 2006). Media representations play a crucial role in the wide circulation of this discourse, through print and electronic newspapers (*Educación Contracorriente*, 2013; *Milenio*, 2011, December 18), as well as through online radio programs (*Radio1812*, 2013).

The “no choice” discourse describes migrants as victimized by structural injustice, with migration their only possible means of personal and familial survival. The causes of this victimization, however, are left largely unexplained and tend to be described in general and dehistoricized ways. In official language, these conditions are described as “la coyuntura actual” (*the current juncture*), but this decontextualized victimization is also articulated in everyday conversation, such as when one woman described to me her motivation for migration as “la situación como vamos” (*the situation we are in*). In her work on Mexican migration to the United States, Dick argues that this discourse of victimization functions to “rationalize the inevitability of a particular outcome,” in this case, migration to the *United States* (2010, p. 92).

Moreover, the “no choice” discourse represents migrants as trapped in the field of power relations, lacking any possibility of freedom—in other words, as wholly victimized. Migrant agency in this account is eliminated; this discursive formation therefore erases the possibility of agentive action under conditions of oppression. Furthermore, the dehistoricized depiction of structural victimization deployed in this discourse erases the ongoing development of power relations, instead presenting them as immanent and perduring. A poststructuralist approach, emphasizing the contingency and continual constitution of power relations, sheds light on the effect of such claims to permanence; in this case, they work to preclude the possibility of migrants intervening in the field of power relations in any way.

The second discourse, the “hermano lejano” (distant brother) discourse (Landolt et al., 1999), is largely limited to the transnational Salvadoran community, where it is invoked in eponymous popular culture productions including a song by Ricardo Paz and a national television show. It also appears in governmental discussions of housing credits (Rivera, 2013) and patron saint feast days (Escobar, 2013). The “hermano lejano” discourse represents migrants as heroic male agents who ensure the survival of their family and of their nation through their hard work, thereby connecting to gendered discourses of male bread-winners. In this discourse, the migrant is both close and far, remaining part of the Salvadoran family despite his physical

distance, constituting this familial tie through the sending of regular remittances. The “hermano lejano” discourse therefore functions to construct a discursive and ideological model migrant, a perfect transnational citizen who functions as a disciplining force in the regulation of migrant behavior.

Since this discursive formation is less well-known, I illustrate its function through a brief discussion of recent polemics surrounding the *Hermano Lejano* monument in San Salvador, which is dedicated to Salvadoran migrants. The monument was erected by the right-wing mayor—and future President—Armando Calderón Sol in 1994, a scant 2 years after the signing of the peace accords that ended the Salvadoran civil war; its construction coincided with the increasing role of migrant remittances in supporting the Salvadoran economy. The continuing importance of the monument in the Salvadoran imaginary of migration is highlighted by the fact that it is currently undergoing a costly renovation totaling \$109,000 (Iglesias, 2012, May 9).

As part of this remodeling, a prominent national newspaper sponsored a contest in which Salvadorans proposed a range of new titles for the monument, some of which are listed in *Table 1* (Marroquín, 2009, 79). Significantly, although they question the name of the monument, these suggestions are clearly shaped by the “hermano lejano” discourse, articulating its primary tenets quite explicitly. Proposals 1 and 2 highlight the crucial role of migrants in maintaining the nation’s economy, while the following two proposals highlight the affective motivation for this heroism. Similarly, proposals 5 and 6 highlight explicitly the courage and fervor of the heroic migrant. Not all suggestions took up the “hermano lejano” discourse in such an unproblematic way: one migrant, for example, cleverly suggested renaming the monument “hermanos alejados” (*brothers who have been pushed away*), hinting at the history of conquest, military dictatorship, oligarchic rule, civil war, and neoliberal trade policies from which undocumented Salvadoran migration has emerged.

Table 1
Proposals for renaming the *Hermano Lejano* Monument.

1	Monumento a hermanos generadores de divisas para El Salvador en el extranjero	<i>Monument to the brothers who generate capital for El Salvador from abroad</i>
2	Monumento al recuerdo de los que un día nos dejaron para nuestra supervivencia	<i>Monument in memory of those who left us one day for our survival</i>
3	Salvadoreños en el exterior: peregrinos del amor	<i>Salvadorans in the exterior: Pilgrims of love</i>
4	Monumento el corazón de nuestros hermanos	<i>Monument to the heart of our brothers</i>
5	Monumento al valiente emigrante salvadoreño	<i>Monument to the courageous Salvadoran emigrant</i>
6	Monumento al guanaco digno y ferviente	<i>Monument to the noble and fervent Salvi^a</i>

^a “Guanaco” in proposal 6 is a nickname for a Salvadoran, which often has a negative connotation when used by outsiders but is more a term of endearment when used by Salvadorans. I have attempted to capture its sense by translating it as “Salvi”, a nickname for a Salvadoran used in the United States.

These proposals illustrate the reach of the “hermano lejano” discourse, demonstrating how the ideological components of this discursive formation are reinforced even as the name itself is challenged. In contrast to the “no choice” discourse, the “hermano lejano” discourse highlights migrant agency, but does so through the erasure of migrants' victimization. Missing from this discourse are the harrowing experiences migrants face as they travel north, including even death in all too many cases; absent too are the harsh realities of migrants' lives in the United States, where they often work long hours doing heavy physical labor, going home to overcrowded apartments and stretching every dollar in order to send money home. Most markedly elided, however, are the experiences of women migrants, who for some time have represented a growing sector of the transnational Salvadoran community (Mahler, 1999; Zentgraf, 2002). The “hermano lejano” discourse portrays a heroic male migrant who successfully supports his family and his nation, erasing women's role in such productive labor and thus contributing to misogynist discourses, structures, and ideologies that would limit women's role to reproductive labor. Moreover, the exclusion of women from the “hermano lejano” discourse implicitly supports an understanding of women's agency as limited and thus not consonant with the unconstrained agency of the “hermano lejano”.

Like the “no choice” discourse, therefore, the “hermano lejano” discourse hides the historical development and ongoing construction of the field of power relations. Thus, these two dominant discourses engage in similar processes of historical erasure in order to present two contrastive images of migrant agency: one represents migrants as entirely victimized and the other as wholly agentive. These dominant discourses thus present reductive and conflicting views of migrant agency while also erasing women's agentive participation in migration. In this discursive context, women's narratives of migration constitute a key site in which to explore conceptualizations of agency.

Articulating agency and coercion in migration narratives

In this section, I turn to an analysis of women's narratives of migration, exploring how they take up these existing discourses on migrant agency in retrospectively creating meaning from the experiences in which they themselves became migrants. The women participating in this study were undocumented economic migrants from El Salvador, who borrowed money to pay between \$6000 and \$7000 to a guide or *coyote*, who then arranged their journey to the United States. Migrants traveled in groups of 20 to 30, with usually only three to four women per group; under these conditions, women migrants were extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Falcon, 2001). On their journey north, undocumented migrants suffer acute physical hardship and dehumanizing treatment; often they are packed into the backs of enclosed vehicles in airless conditions and their journeys inevitably involve days of walking through inhospitable desert terrain. Such physical suffering engenders mental anguish and emotional trauma about the unknown outcome of the journey. Indeed, 477 unauthorized migrants died trying to cross the southern

U.S. border in 2012; due to increasing enforcement that has pushed migrants to ever-harsher desert regions, those attempting to cross the U.S.–Mexico border are eight times more likely to die today than they were a decade ago (Anderson, 2013).

The narratives analyzed here were collected as part of a larger ethnographic study of everyday communication in transnational Salvadoran families. I conducted 12 open-ended interviews with undocumented Salvadoran migrants, both men and women, during which every participant chose to recount their experiences during their journeys from El Salvador to the United States, often in great detail. The participants are all originally from a small rural village located in western El Salvador where I lived and worked for 4 years as a social justice activist. Recounted in an ethnographic interview setting, these narratives were primarily directed to the researcher, myself, as the most immediate audience. However, my presence, as well as that of my recording equipment, also provided an opportunity for the narrators to address a broader audience of U.S. citizens, in part because they knew me primarily as a social justice activist. Indeed, at the beginning of each interview, I overtly positioned myself as an ally of all migrants in the struggle against the injustice and exploitation of current U.S. immigration policy. My own positioning, both historically and in the immediate interaction, influenced the framing of these migration narratives, and our prior relationships were a crucial factor in creating a sense of *confianza*, or trust and accountability, which allowed for the sharing of these experiences of extreme vulnerability.

My study seeks to honor the participants' trust in me, as well as the burden and privilege of accountability I feel in presenting their experiences to a wider audience. Therefore, my analysis does not seek to simply discover agency in unexpected places (cf. critique by Madhok et al., 2013) nor does it claim to give the marginalized a space to speak. Rather, I bring to bear the tools of linguistic anthropology to attend to the particular speech practices through which women migrants rework understandings of agency in creating meaning from experiences of extreme coercion and vulnerability. Through this careful analysis, I seek to stay faithful to the messages of these women's stories, learning from their narratives in order to respect and value their experiences.

Collective framings of migrant victimization

In recounting their journeys north, these women drew on the discourse of migrant victimization to describe their experiences as ones of structural marginalization and vulnerability. The most pervasive representation of this marginalization involved portrayals of bodily vulnerability, depicting the embodied suffering caused by the migrants' marginal structural position: because their journeys were unauthorized, migrants had to hide their “illegal” physical presence. Traveling as they did in a legal void (Coutin, 2005), their bodies were literally out of place. One example of this embodied vulnerability comes from a narrative told by Tina,² a young woman in her late 20s who was attempting to join her husband in the United States, leaving

behind two young children aged 2 and 3. In this excerpt, Tina describes the conditions under which she and her fellow migrants traveled.

Example 1. Tina³

1	Y, y, y l-,	<i>And, and, and l-,</i>
2	cuando, los echan a las trocas,	<i>when, they throw them in the</i>
	(0.3)	<i>trucks, (0.3)</i>
3	los tapan, con lona. (1.1)	<i>they cover them, with a</i>
		<i>tarpaulin. (1.1)</i>
4	y encima les tiran, madera, este,	<i>And on top they throw, wood,</i>
	sillas, (0.2) fierro, ...	<i>um, chairs, (0.2), iron,</i>
5	Hay mucha gente que, que llega,	<i>There are many people who, who</i>
		<i>arrive,</i>
6	hasta allá al final, ya,	<i>there at the very end, just about</i>
	terminándose de ahogar. ...	<i>suffocating.</i>
7	Va uno, así, de lado. (0.8)	<i>One goes, like this, on one's side.</i>
		<i>(0.8)</i>
8	Unos pies para allá,	<i>One person's feet this way,</i>
9	la cabeza para el otro lado.	<i>the head the other way.</i>
10	El otro va, (0.3) con la cabeza m-,	<i>The next person goes, (0.3) With</i>
		<i>their head m-,</i>
11	al lado de los pies del otro,	<i>next to the other person's feet,</i>
12	Así, un tendido abajo. (0.5)	<i>like this, one layer below. (0.5)</i>
13	Luego encima, va otro tendido,	<i>Then on top, there is another layer,</i>
14	dependiendo la cantidad de	<i>depending on the number of</i>
	personas,	<i>people,</i>
15	que van.	<i>who are traveling.</i>

Here, Tina describes an experience of extreme physical vulnerability, as migrants were forced to travel in extremely crowded conditions, lacking space to move and air to breathe. The migrants' bodies were physically configured in a precise manner in order to fit the most people in the smallest space, as if they were a form of merchandise. Later in the narrative, Tina summarizes this experience, saying "lo tiran a uno como maleta" (they throw one like a suitcase). Tina's description of embodied vulnerability echoes Foucault's formulation of "docile bodies" (1977), which describes the minute ways in which space, time, and activities are controlled in order to produce a combination of forces that is greater than the sum of its parts. In this framework, "disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination" (1977, 138). In other words, the body is the nexus whereupon increasing power is exercised in order to generate greater productive capacity. The undocumented migrants as represented in these narratives are clearly caught up in such disciplining processes, their bodies controlled in minute ways to facilitate their introduction into the U.S. labor market as an optimally exploitable work force.

Notably, in recounting this experience of embodied vulnerability on her journey north, Tina uses a collective rather than an individual framing. Rather than using the first-person to tell a narrative of personal experience, this framework uses the third-person, both plural (*them*—lines 2–6) and singular (*one*—lines 7–11), to refer to the group of migrants with whom Tina traveled. This speech practice functions to distance Tina from the embodied vulnerability that she describes; it is not *I myself* whose body was

disciplinarily configured and who was thrown like a suitcase. Rather this embodied victimization is suffered by *one*, a generic migrant whose figuration represents this treatment as reflecting the shared experience of many unauthorized travelers. Thus, through the use of third-person referents in recounting her experience, Tina draws upon the existing discourse of migrant victimization to make meaning of the physical vulnerability of her migration journey without explicitly taking on this vulnerable experience as her own.

The dominant discourse of migrant victimization was also drawn on to describe the cognitive and affective suffering caused by migrants' experiences of extreme structural marginalization. This is exemplified in the narrative told by Dora, a single mother in her late 40s, who decided to migrate after seasonal labor in the sugar cane harvest disappeared thanks to free trade agreements. In this excerpt, Dora describes the migrants' responses to being transported all night in a truck that drove at an extremely fast speed with all its lights turned off.

Example 2. Dora

1	Allí fue que nos fregaron. Ya llegando a Mexico.	<i>That was where they screwed us up. When we were just arriving in Mexico.</i>
2	Una noche entera, no le digo pues.	<i>A whole night, don't I tell you.</i>
3	Una noche entera, (0.3) pero así en lo oscuro. (0.6)	<i>A whole night, (0.3) but in darkness. (0.6)</i>
4	Que nosotros, nosotr- – Bueno. (0.3)	<i>That we, we- – Well, (0.3)</i>
5	Yo creo que toditos nos imaginamos igual. (0.5)	<i>I think we all of us imagined the same thing. (0.5)</i>
6	Que talvez a, a destazarnos nos llevaban.	<i>That maybe they were taking us to be butchered.</i>

Here, Dora describes an experience of anxiety and fear, triggered by the conditions in which the migrants traveled, thus representing the migrants as cognitively and affectively victimized. This fear is not unreasonable in an era where there are regular reports of large-scale massacres of undocumented Central American migrants in Mexico (El Universal, 2010, August 25; La Jornada, 2011). Such descriptions emphasize the thorough-going significance of coercion, portraying the migrants as situated squarely within a field of power relations in which they are subject to extreme bodily disciplining that in turn shapes their embodied subjectivity through physical, cognitive, and affective victimization.

As in the case of Tina's narrative, Dora here makes use of a collective rather than an individual framework in narrating her experience. However, rather than using third-person forms, Dora's narrative refers to the migrants using the first-person plural (*we*). In this way, Dora represents herself as part of a larger group of migrants who were afraid; in this depiction, it was not just Dora alone who had this affective response, nor yet was this the experience of other, third-person referents. Rather,

the *we* framework represents the experience of fear as being shared by all the migrants together, a collectivity that is heightened through the use of the emphatic “*toditos*” (all of us) (line 5). Through this particular speech practice, Dora draws on the existing discourse of migrant victimization, using it as a framework through which to constitute her experience as one of shared affective vulnerability for herself and all the others in her group.

In both of these examples, the specific speech practices used to represent victimized migrants make use of collective rather than individual framings. Such collective frameworks, which recounted events primarily as experiences shared by a group, were far more frequent in these narratives than framings of individual experience. In a quantitative grammatical study of these narratives (Author, 2012), I found that fully 70% of all references to migrants used collective terms, either *we* or generic referents.⁴ The widespread use of such generic collective framings in these narratives instantiated a process of shared subjectification through which a collective undocumented migrant subject emerged. The creation of such shared subjectivity through narrative constitutes a process of memorialization (Mendoza-Denton, 2008), in which past experiences are re-membered and re-figured as collective (Ahmed, 1999; Carsten, 1995). Memorialization is perhaps of most significance for groups whose marginalization leaves them without official repositories for their joint histories; for these communities, the “distributed memory” (Mendoza-Denton, 2008, 177) shared by group members is of crucial importance. In these migration narratives, the pervasive use of collective framings thus memorializes the experiences of unauthorized journeys through the constitution of shared subjectivity.

Moreover, these collective framings consistently drew on the dominant discourse of migrant victimization as a resource for constructing meaning from of these women's individual migration experiences. The pervasiveness of this dominant discourse in representing and interpolating migrant experience may seem to simply replicate the elision of migrant agency found in the “no choice” discourse. However, the following section will turn to an analysis of another speech practice used by these migrant women to create meaning from their experiences, illustrating how this practice functions to juxtapose representations of individual subjectivity alongside these collective depictions of victimization.

Subjectification through contrastive individualization

While these women often represented their migration journeys as shared experiences through use of a collective framework, their narratives at times included depictions of themselves as individuals, a speech practice I call contrastive individualization. A clear example of this practice can be seen in an example from Dora's narrative; here, she describes how she fainted when trying to climb down from the truck after the frightening ride recounted in Example 2. After eventually coming to, she asked a 14-year-old girl who was part of her group what they all had experienced during the ride. She then voices the girl as responding as follows.

Example 3. Dora

1	“Nosotros sentimos bien feo” me dijo.	“We felt really bad” she told me.
2	“como que”, (0.4) “como que a un,	“as if”, (0.4) “as if to an,
3	callejón nos llevaban” me dijo así ve. (0.6)	alleyway they were taking us” she told me like this. (0.6)
4	Me dijo a mi “venimos todos traumados”.	She told me “we all arrived traumatized”.
5	Nada mas que no se han enfermado igual que mi.	It's just that they didn't get sick like I did.
6	Yo me desmaye, cai. (0.2) ...	I fainted, I fell down (0.2)...
7	Ellos no. Ellos solo eso sentieron,	They didn't. They just felt this,
8	aquella cosa, así bien fea. (0.6) Toditos.	this thing, like this really bad. (0.6). All of them.

In this example, Dora once again draws on the discourse of migrant victimization, this time articulating the experience of shared affective vulnerability through the words of another migrant (lines 1–4). Citing the voice of another works to strengthen Dora's collective interpretation; this voicing represents Dora's description as authorized and validated by the experience of others. Beginning in line 5, however, this strongly collective representation is fractured as Dora emphasizes her unique victimization: she was the only one who fainted, the only one who suffered a physical response to the experience of affective trauma that all the migrants shared. Through this shift from a collective to an individual framing, Dora depicts her experience as resulting from her unique embodied vulnerability.

In this juxtaposition of generalized and personalized frameworks, the dominant discourse of migrant victimization is deployed in carrying out processes of both collective and individual subjectification. While the collective subjectivity of the migrants is constructed as suffering a shared affective traumatization, the use of contrastive individualization constitutes Dora herself as undergoing a highly personalized process of embodied subjectification. The shift from collective to individual framings functions to highlight Dora's victimization and minimize her agency in comparison to that of the other migrants. The comparative aspect of agency has been previously pointed out by Villalón, who notes that “agency does not occur in a vacuum, but is always structurally limited and relative to others' agency (2010, p. 553). The analysis presented here highlights the speech practices that produce such comparisons, demonstrating how such contrastive framings constitute both collective and individual subjectification. Furthermore, in deploying the discourse of migrant victimization to interpolate these two layered processes of subjectification, the undifferentiated hegemony of this dominant discursive formation is troubled. While this discourse frames migrant victimization as the uniform result of dehistoricized and perduring marginalization, in Dora's narrative, the experiences and effects of victimization are uneven, shared in some ways and highly particular in others. Thus, the speech practice of juxtaposing collective and individual frameworks generates particular semiotic outcomes that incrementally disrupt hegemonic discursive representations of migrant agency.

In addition to creating depictions of increased individual victimization, contrastive individualization also functioned in these narratives to represent particular migrants as capable of more agentive action. An example from Tina's narrative illustrates this function; in this excerpt she describes how she responded to the bodily disciplining the migrants suffered in the elision of their physical presence. Here, she describes a strategy she used to avoid traveling in these inhumane conditions for the remainder of her journey.

Example 4. Tina

1	En las trocas, donde lo llevan a uno,	<i>In the trucks, where they take one,</i>
2	uno va bien oprimido. (0.7) ...	<i>one is really oppressed. (0.7) ...</i>
3	Hay quienes que, bueno yo yo,	<i>There are some who, well I,</i>
4	fui un poco mas inteligente,	<i>I was a little more intelligent,</i>
5	para no irme en ese - (1.1)	<i>to not travel in this - (1.1)</i>
6	Me iba adelante, con el motorista. (1.4)	<i>I would go up front, with the driver. (1.4)</i>
7	Siempre, (0.7) el me decía, (0.7)	<i>Always, (0.7) he would tell me, (0.7)</i>
8	que, (0.6) que, vigilara bien. (0.9)	<i>that, (0.6) that, I should watch well. (0.9)</i>
9	Que viera, las patrullas. (0.2)	<i>That I should look out for, the patrols. (0.2)</i>
10	cuando ibamos cruzando Mexico.	<i>when we were crossing Mexico.</i>

In this example, Tina depicts herself as engaging in agentive action to ensure her survival and minimize the extent of her physical coercion by petitioning the *coyote* to let her ride in the cab of the truck as a lookout.⁵ This representation juxtaposes collective embodied victimization (lines 1–2) with first-person singular referents that emphasize the individual nature of her agentive response (lines 3–6). The switch from generic third-person to specific first-person framing emerges saliently in line 3, which begins with a generic referent (*some*) and then transitions to an individual account, using two instances of the optional first-person pronoun (*I*) to emphasize the contrast. Tina frames this individual agency as emerging from her greater intelligence in responding to the conditions of marginalization in which the migrants were forced to travel.

Unlike the first three examples, which all draw on the dominant discourse of migrant victimization, this example takes up the discourse of migrant agency. However, unlike the dominant heroic discourse, which elides victimization to celebrate a decontextualized form of masculine agency, here Tina's agentive actions are depicted as emerging from and responding to experiences of significant coercion. Moreover, these actions do not completely eradicate coercion but simply mitigate its effects. Although Tina escapes the most extreme physical disciplining, her body is still subject to control by others; her presence in the cab of the truck is allowed only on the condition that she watch out for immigration police.

Thus, this representation draws on and juxtaposes the dominant discourse of migrant agency with that of migrant victimization, emphasizing the simultaneity of agency and coercion. As in the case of Dora's narrative, these dominant discourses serve as resources for the constitution of narrative processes of subjectification operating at both the individual

and the collective level. However, unlike the previous example, here the dominant discourses are deployed contrastively to depict individual and collective subjectivities as quite differentiated in terms of agency. This juxtaposition here serves to highlight Tina's situated agency over and against the victimization of the migrants as a whole. Once again, these particular narrative speech practices generate specific social meanings that complicate dominant discourses of migrant agency; by interweaving these two discourses in depicting overlapping processes of subjectification, Tina's narrative draws out the points of contrast between dominant discursive formations, thus confronting the logic of their hegemony with the illogic of this conflict.

Moreover, in making a claim to agentivity, however situational and shaped by coercion, Tina challenges the masculinist underpinnings of the discourse of migrant agency. A final example further illustrates the gendered dimensions of the agency-coercion continuum that dynamically shaped women's experiences. This example is taken from the narrative of Magda, a young mother in her early 20s who left behind an infant son and traveled to join her child's father in the United States. Here, Magda describes how her group spent the night at a hotel, where she and the other women in the group were expected to share a room with two beds. Due to the overcrowding, she was left without a place to sleep, which put her in a precarious situation.

Example 5. Magda

1	Como fui la última que entré yo. (1.0)	<i>Because I was the last one to go in. (1.0)</i>
2	Y no pues, que no había cama para mi. (0.8)	<i>And no, there was no bed for me. (0.8)</i>
3	Y que entonces, el coyote quería que yo me fuera a dormir a su cuarto. (0.3)	<i>And then, the coyote wanted me to go sleep in his room. (0.3)</i>
4	Y le dije "No". (0.3) "Yo no voy a dormir allá" le dije.	<i>And I said "No". (0.3) "I am not going to sleep there" I told him.</i>
5	"Aunque sea en el piso me voy a quedar". (0.2)	<i>"Rather I will stay on the floor". (0.2)</i>
6	Y allí fue que me dijo, (0.4)	<i>And that was when he told me, (0.4)</i>
7	"Hasta aquí eres mi protegida.	<i>"Up to here you are my protected one.</i>
8	pero de aquí para allá, ya no" me dijo.	<i>From here on, no more" he told me.</i>

After being left without a bed in the women's room (lines 1–2), Magda was invited to sleep with the *coyote* (line 3), a thinly-veiled suggestion that she make herself sexually available to him.

Magda voices herself as strongly refusing this proposal, portraying herself as insisting on an agentive ability to control her own actions: she will not sleep with the *coyote*, but instead will sleep on the floor (lines 4–5). However, despite the strong agentivity of this self-depiction, Magda is nevertheless represented as remaining subject to coercion when the *coyote* responds to her refusal with the threat that he will leave her unprotected from others who might wish to prey on her vulnerability (lines 7–8). This example hints at one type of victimization that is far too frequent in the experiences of

women migrants: sexual violence (Falcon, 2001). Although Magda escaped this particular instance of victimization, the heightened precarity of her position as a woman migrant remains.

This example once again illustrates the juxtaposition of the contrastive discourses of agency and victimization in interpolating overlapping processes of subjectification. Here, the shared vulnerability of women migrants to sexual victimization is contrasted, through discursive personalization, to a more agentive individual response. As in Example 4, the situated agency of the individual subjectivity is drawn out in contrast to the victimization of the collective subjectivity; once again, the conflict between the two dominant discourses of migrant agency is highlighted through these processes of subjectification. Moreover, both the coercive constraints and the agentive action depicted in this example are thoroughly gendered, thus representing a clear challenge to the masculine bias of the discourse of migrant agency. These examples demonstrate that when the women represent themselves as acting agentively in these narratives, they do not present their actions as occurring in isolation as in the dominant discourse of migrant agency. Rather, their actions are situated within a field of power relations that have socially constructed possibilities and constraints for agency. Thus, for these women, the simultaneous continuum of coercion and agency from which their actions emerge is gendered in highly particular yet thoroughgoing ways.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the nuanced conceptualizations of agency that emerge from narratives told by women migrants about their dangerous journeys to the United States. In producing these understandings, the narratives engage with dominant discourses of migrant agency, drawing on these discursive formations in ways that highlight their contradictions and momentarily destabilize their hegemony. The analysis demonstrated the importance of particular speech practices in constructing these conceptualizations of agency, tracing a pattern in which widespread collective framings were at times contrasted with highly individual representations. Through the juxtaposition of these two frameworks, the narratives instantiated overlapping processes of subjectification, simultaneously constituting collective and individual subjectivities. Moreover, these two framings functioned to construct contrastive agency for these overlapping subjects; in some cases, the juxtaposition depicted greater individual agency, while in others it emphasized increased personal victimization. In creating meaning from their experience of migration, these women thus insist on the particularity of experiences of both agency and coercion while also situating these individual experiences within a framework of shared conditions. Thus, positioning within the field of power relations is conceptualized as both unique and shared, both individual and collective.

This analysis therefore empirically demonstrates Madhok's suggestion that processes of subjectification are often uneven, leading to different outcomes for different people and at different times (Madhok, 2013). These narratives thus reveal an understanding of agency that is particular and situated, emerging from individual characteristics and shared experiences. Moreover, in

these experiences, agency and coercion are always already present, simultaneously shaping one another. In understanding their experience of becoming migrants, these women therefore reject the hegemony of dominant discourses of total victimization or unmitigated agency. Instead, these discourses are interwoven and contrasted to produce highly particular accounts of ambiguous agency. The analysis has sought to draw out these contradictions through a close analysis of specific speech practices in order to "give space to the tensions and contradictions in these women's lives" (Andrijasevic, 2010, p. 122). For it is ultimately only these contradictions that offer hope for possible freedoms by illuminating the contingency of structures and discourses of unequal power relations.

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Endnotes

¹ This focus on language, however, does not mean that material concerns do not matter for the study of agency. Rather, discursive and material dimensions operate in conjunction with one another; this article contributes to a growing body of literature in the *language materiality* approach (Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2012), which argues for the importance of considering the interconnection of material and discursive forces (Bucholtz, 2014; Heller, 2003; Sharp, 2000).

² The names of all participants have been changed to protect their identity.

³ The close transcriptions aim to represent as fully as possible the speech. Conventions are as follows: punctuation represents intonation contours, words with a dash - are cut off, ellipsis represents lines excluded, (numbers in parentheses) represent pauses in seconds, and [square brackets] represent overlapping speech.

⁴ Generic referents can be seen in use in example 1, where Tina consistently refers to the migrant participants using *uno* (one): "uno va así de lado" (one goes like this on one's side).

⁵ Physically separating herself from the group and putting herself in closer proximity to the *coyote* likely put Tina at risk for sexual assault, especially as he was habitually drunk. This extreme risk-taking indicates the severity of the structural coercion with which women migrants must contend on these unauthorized journeys.

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