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Subjectivity, Agency, and the New Latin American History of Gender and Sexuality

Robert M. Buffington*
University of Colorado at Boulder

Abstract

Recent critiques of the concept of agency by social historians have raised concerns about the ways in which it distorts, flattens, and over-simplifies the historical field. This article argues that a better theoretical understanding of the complex intersections of subjectivity (especially the process of subjection through which the subject is produced and maintained) and agency (as exercised by the subject) will resolve many of those concerns and provide a firmer theoretical foundation for future work on the histories of gender and sexuality in Latin America. The article has four parts. First, it discusses the concept of subjectivity and explains its usefulness for historical analysis. Second, it examines two recent critiques of agency and the challenges they pose for historians. Third, it reviews Judith Butler's recent work on the relationship between subjectivity and agency, shows how that work helps address the concerns raised the recent critiques of agency, and discusses why Butler's formulation of the subjectivity and agency problem might be especially useful for historians of gender and sexuality. Finally, it explores the implications of Butler's research agenda for the new Latin American history of gender and sexuality.

Introduction

Since their inception, the intertwined histories of gender and sexuality have been fields in productive turmoil, riven by contentious debates over theory and method, and obsessed with the very real dangers of imposing contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality on past societies. Productive turmoil certainly describes the current state of the history of gender and sexuality in Latin America. Sueann Caulfield summarizes in a 2001 *Hispanic American Historical Review* essay,

> The problem now is the large quantity of significant work, the variety of topics, theoretical approaches and methodologies, and the multiple ways in which this scholarship has influenced how we understand Latin American history.[1]

Indeed, the countless conference papers, articles, edited volumes, and books on the history of gender and sexuality in Latin America that have appeared since Caulfield's review, suggests that the 'problem' has only

gotten bigger. And while productive turmoil isn't necessarily a bad thing (and much preferable to its antithesis), a bit of stock-taking at this crucial juncture would seem to be in order. As Elizabeth Hutchison assures us in a 2003 review essay for *Latin American Research Review*, 'it is now possible to turn our attention in a sustained way to theoretical and comparative issues, drawing from this exercise a sense of the potential of gender analysis to transform Latin American history'.[2]

Much of this theoretical and comparative work has already begun. Several excellent comparative collections – many pre-dating Hutchison's review – have helped us to think about the history of gender and sexuality in Latin America 'in a sustained way' that takes into account regional similarities and differences as well as historical continuities and changes.[3] Nor have historians of gender and sexuality shied away from theoretical debates. In the introduction to *Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Latin America since Independence*, William French and Katherine Bliss draw on a range of theorists – Michel Foucault on the productivity of discourse, Anne Fausto-Sterling on biological problems with sexual categories, Judith Butler on the performativity of gender – in order to foreground the historical construction of gendered and sexual identities. Their conclusions provide a concise and valuable formulation of the identity 'problem' and its implications for historians:

> The first [conclusion] is that identity construction almost always involves differentiation and exclusion; that is, it takes place by establishing difference, by simultaneously identifying, or calling into being, some who belong to or constitute a certain category and others who do not. A second important conclusion is that identities are never singular and unified; rather, they are fragmented and multiply constructed through . . . numerous, often contradictory, discourses enunciated at different sites, such as in legal codes, doctors' offices, and prisons. Racial, class, gender, sexual, and national identities are not only mutually constituted then; they are also adopted and asserted by individuals in different and contradictory ways.[4]

Important as these insights into differentiation, exclusion, and the fragmentation of identities are, they raise another unresolved set of issues, this time involving questions of self-perception and intentionality, or – to put it in conventional philosophical terms – subjectivity and agency. As French and Bliss explain:

> This [focus on identity construction] is not to posit the existence of autonomous individuals who have the power simply to decide which of an unlimited number of subject positions they will occupy. Nor is it to deny the ability of individuals, conceptualized in however fragmented a manner, to exercise any agency at all in deciding how to take up or identify with the limited and contradictory subject positions to which they are subjected . . . [We] view the historical construction of identity not as an unproblematic and direct result of discourse but as the very subject that calls for historical analysis.[5]

Identity, they argue, is neither freely chosen nor uncritically assumed – an eminently sensible qualification that must be taken into account in any discussion of historical agency. At the same time, however, their formulation of the problem gives us very little sense of where the agency exercised by 'fragmented' subjects operating from 'limited and contradictory subject positions' might come from or what it might look like.

My purpose in this article, then, address these questions by shedding some theoretical light on the complex intersections of subjectivity (especially the process of subjection through which the subject is produced and maintained) and agency (as exercised by the subject). The article has four parts. First, I briefly discuss the concept of subjectivity and explain its usefulness for historical analysis. Second, I examine two recent (and particularly compelling) critiques of agency by Walter Johnson and Eric Van Young and the challenges they pose for historians. Third, I review Judith Butler's recent work on the relationship between subjectivity and agency, show how that work helps address the concerns raised by Johnson and Van Young, and discuss why Butler's formulation of the subjectivity and agency problem might be especially useful for historians of gender and sexuality. Finally, I explore the implications of Butler's research agenda for the new history of gender and sexuality in Latin America.

Why Subjectivity?

Philosophers have been debating subjectivity for centuries. For the most part, historians have preferred to ignore these debates – usually with good reason. However, recent theoretical advances in our understanding of subjectivity, coupled with growing concerns over the troublesome concept of agency (which we'll examine presently), suggest that the time has come to reconsider. Of particular interest to historians should be the insistence on the part of recent theorists that subjectivity necessarily connotes a 'sense of social and cultural entanglement . . . [of] the way our immediate daily life is always already caught up in complex political, social, and philosophical – that is shared – concerns'.[6] As Nick Mansfield explains:

> 'Subjectivity' refers . . . to an abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and the encourages us to imagine that, or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire, and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience. In this way, the subject is always linked to something outside of it – an idea or principle or the society of other subjects. It is this linkage that the word 'subject' insists upon . . . One is always subject *to* or *of* something. The word subject, therefore, proposes that the self is not a separate and isolated entity but one that operates at the intersections of general truths and shared principles.[7]

Or, as Sherry Ortner puts it in a recent essay, subjectivity is necessarily comprised of both

> the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, and fear that animate acting subjects . . . [and] the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought, and so on.[8]

This insistence that the subject 'is always linked to something outside of it' situates it firmly within a specific cultural and social 'formation' that can only be properly understood in historical context. Seen as in this light (as the self-in-the-world), the philosophical concept of subjectivity becomes a useful, even essential, for historical analysis. The same cannot be said for agency – at least if we listen to some of its recent critics.

The Problem with Agency

What is it about agency that so bedevils social historians these days? The concept seems simple enough. An historical agent is someone who did something on purpose, someone who did something that they chose to do in order to achieve a goal of some sort. These doers-of-intentional-acts are said to have exercised agency. And if elite men have exercised agency a bit more freely and on a grander scale than most folks, and if their story gets told more often and in greater detail, that hasn't discouraged social historians from attempting to recover the more constrained (if not always restrained) agency of less privileged actors. To be sure, the recovery of subaltern agency presents daunting practical and methodological challenges. But over the years intrepid social historians have demonstrated considerable skill and ingenuity in confronting those challenges. So why the recent upsurge of discontent among some of the discipline's ablest and most conscientious practitioners? Just what is the trouble with agency?

Walter Johnson confronts the agency 'problem' head on in a 2003 article 'On Agency' written for the *Journal of Social History*.[9] His concise, impassioned essay delivers a scathing attack on fellow historians of slavery for their under-theorized, self-congratulatory assumptions about the agency of slaves. Although acknowledging that most of his colleagues use the concept of agency rather loosely, Johnson nonetheless insists that their casual acceptance of the term

> smuggles a notion of the universality of a liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice, right into the middle of a conversation about slavery against which that supposedly natural . . . condition was originally defined.

In classic liberal terms, Johnson points out, enslaved peoples are *by definition* incapable of agency in any meaningful sense – and this conceptual quandary ensures that any attempt to recover slave agency will end up 'in a mess'. To make matters worse, many social historians

> by applying the jargon of self-determination and choice to the historical condition of civil objectification and choicelessness [have] shoved to the side in the process a consideration of human-ness lived outside the conventions of liberal agency.

Faced with the alternative of denying slaves their humanity altogether, most of these historians have accepted instead 'a strange syllogism in which the bare fact (as opposed to the self conscious assertion) of enslaved "humanity" has come to be seen as "resistance" to slavery'.[10] However generous this interpretation of the links between agency and humanity might appear, Johnson argues,

> it represents the alienation of enslaved people from the historical circumstances and ideological idioms of their own resistance, from [the] 'circumstances' and 'traditions' which interpellated them as subjects and conditioned the meaning of their actions.[11]

Thus even in this seemingly generous usage, agency is implicated in a liberal worldview that seeks to universalize and naturalize itself at the expense of other ways of understanding the world.

The combative tone of Johnson's attack on agency is hardly unique among social historians. In the introduction to *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence*, Eric Van Young dismisses agency as 'too small a fig leaf to cover the embarrassingly recalcitrant nature of social reality'. In his view, the central problem with agency isn't so much the universalizing of liberal self-hood as it is the difficulty of determining the 'locus of agency' in the first place. 'If it is to be found at the level of the individual', he argues:

> then in political action we are forced upon a sort of anarchic Hobbesian model of a war of all against all in which the caustic juices of agency virtually dissolve structures into smoking puddles, and in which agency is a proxy for rational maximalization. If it is located at the level of relatively cohesive groups – communities of some sort, let us say – then we are faced with a dilemma: either we must convincingly show how collectivities exercise and delegate agency, or we reify and romanticize the very social entity-structures to whose strait-jacketing effects on individual options for action the concept of agency is meant to be an antidote.[12]

For Van Young, the problem with agency is that it over-simplifies historical causation by focusing on *either* individual *or* collectivized agency while ignoring or at least downplaying the central role of culture in imbuing their acts with meaning and, by extension, with 'utility'. As he sees it, the rationality, whether of individual or collective actors, resides not in the acts themselves (as expressions of individual or collective 'will') but in the shared repertoire of cultural symbols and meanings from which they emerge, and thus in the complex interrelationship between individual actors, collective actors, and the 'structures' within and through which they exercise agency.

As different and as damning as these two critiques of agency are, both seem disturbed more by historians' sloppy use of the concept rather than by the notion that historical actors exercised some level of self-determination, however limited that might have been. Although Johnson considers the term itself too freighted with liberal baggage to be of much use, he nonetheless notes that

> we see the beginnings of a history of the meaning of humanity under the conditions of slavery which will transform a set of histories framed by the practice of conflating liberal agency with humanity and then seeking to index whether or not slaves were able at any given moment in time to 'preserve their humanity' by seeing how often they acted in a fashion the historian identifies as being sufficiently self-determined.[13]

And Van Young's objections are not so much directed at the concept of agency *per se* but at its inability to give a proper account of the interplay between agents and the social 'structures' that shape and constrain them.

In their critiques of agency, neither Johnson nor Van Young say much about issues of gender and sexuality. Both however highlight the undeniable fact that agency – especially the liberal notions of agency critiqued by Johnson with its insistence on free choice and purposeful action – is especially problematic not just for subaltern men but for women and anyone else considered deviant. In other words, Johnson's contention that slave agency is in fact an oxymoron can and should be extended to include any group against which liberal notions of agency are defined – whether that binary opposition is constructed in terms of race, class, gender, and/or sexuality.

Gender and sexuality as categories of analysis have found their way into most historical accounts of agency, especially in last twenty years or so. Nevertheless, most historians still insist on treating gender and sexuality as independent variables. That is to say that while they acknowledge that historical actors are gendered and sexed beings – Simón Bolívar was a great *man*; Manuela Saenz was a great *woman* – agency itself is generally presented as non-gendered, in theory if not in practice. Thus a focus on agency often works to de-center issues of gender and sexuality, to construe them as influences on but not constitutive of agency. Or, to paraphrase Van Young, the de-centering of social and cultural forces that often accompanies agency's focus on 'rational maximalization' by historical actors tends to dissolve structures like the sex/gender system into 'smoking puddles'.

The Importance of Agency

In the face of these powerful objections, I would nonetheless argue that the development of a theoretical framework which connects the exercise of agency with the process of subjection that enables agency in the first

place is an important first step towards rehabilitating a still useful – if much abused – concept. Despite its flaws, the concept of agency isn't likely to disappear from historical studies anytime soon.[14] Nor should it. In a 1994 'Dialogue on Democracy' with Gayatri Spivak for *Socialist Review*, David Plotke develops a strong case for agency despite its theoretical inadequacies:

> In politics, there are agents. It's true that they are always constrained and deeply shaped in ways that aren't evident in descriptions of their capacities as agents. But they do consider alternatives and make choices. It seems at least as important to seek to understand their judgment and their aims as to explicate the limits of their agency. For that reason I'm not sure – at least regarding politics – that it makes sense to consider an account of agency as inadequate or superficial with respect to something deeper and more substantial behind it.

To which Spivak adds: 'we can try for empowerment in the field of agency'.[15]

Embracing agency might be good political strategy but, as its critics forcibly remind us, it is inadequate historical practice. As the comments of Spivak and Plotke imply, a focus on agency must necessarily leave huge chunks of human experience un- or under-analyzed. And while in politics this conceptual myopia can translate into clarity of purpose (as advocates of 'strategic essentialism' insist), in historical practice it represents missed opportunities.[16] Although as historians we might consider agency to be 'inadequate or superficial' in many respects should we really dispense with it altogether? Perhaps the solution isn't to do away with agency but, as Spivak puts it later in the dialogue, to 'acknowledge in the subject the limits of the agent'.[17]

Agency and Subjectivities

What's needed, then, is not a blanket rejection of agency, as Johnson would seem to prefer, but a better understanding of its heuristic limitations. As the works cited thus far demonstrate, this process is already underway, especially among historians of gender and sexuality in Latin America. Steve Stern, for example, has problematized colonial Mexican women's agency by exposing their complicity in systems of domination.[18] Many of us have explained this kind of complicity in Gramscian terms as the workings of cultural hegemony – in Stern's case a patriarchal pact within which women negotiate a severely constrained quasi-agency. But how exactly does hegemony constrain agency? Gramscian theories describe the way power works systemically to control the discursive and institutional terms of engagement. And recent work in Latin American gender history substantiates that description. But because Gramscian theories – like the political strategies of Spivak and Plotke – focus on subaltern resistance to systems of domination, they work best to explain obviously political behavior and, in more recent work, the political implications of apparently

'non-political' behaviors like consumerism, sex, and domestic violence. This is certainly a step in the right direction. At the same time, however, as Ortner argues:

> Resistance studies are . . . thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity – the intentions, desires, fears, projects – of the actors engaged in those dramas.

And since so much of the drama of domination and resistance around issues of gender and sexuality takes place in domestic spaces, family networks, and local communities, an analytical model that downplays the 'ambivalences and ambiguities . . . the intricate web of articulations and disarticulations that always exist between dominant and dominated' is going to miss much of the action.[19]

Thomas Klubock's review essay in the 2001 *Hispanic American Historical Review* special issue on gender and sexuality looks at recent attempts to resolve this dilemma. He identifies in some of the latest work on Chilean social reform movements an important

> redirection of gender history to the realm of representation . . . away from women's history and social history 'from below' to histories of politics that focus on ways in which gender ideology shapes cultural and political discourses and state policies and, by inference, structures the experiences and positions the subjectivities of subaltern men and women.[20]

This sounds right but I'm not sure exactly what it means – in particular the part about gender ideology shaping, structuring, and positioning things like discourses, experiences, and subjectivities. How does gender ideology manage to do all those things? And how does redirecting 'gender history to the realm of representation' help us understand the process of shaping, structuring, and positioning?

Daniel James takes a preliminary stab at these questions in *Doña María's Story.* At one point, he notes that 'oral testimony enables us to approach the issue of agency and subjectivity in history' and he ends his analysis with the comment that Doña María's often contradictory narratives 'reflect both the power of dominant ideologies and myths but also the power of the storyteller to imbue those forms with her own meanings, her own subjectivity'.[21] Both Klubock and James move beyond the domination/resistance model and both insist on the importance of subjectivity. Neither analysis, however, offers us much by way of explanation or definition of either agency or subjectivity. Nor do they explore the conceptual connection between them.

In her study of working-class women in early twentieth-century U.S. cities, Nan Enstad gives some sense of how an increased attention to the connections between subjectivity and agency might work. She argues that:

> While subjectivities formed through commodity consumption are typically dismissed as superficial . . . working women used popular culture as a resource

> to lay claim to dignified identities as workers, sometimes from the very terms used by others to degrade them. In addition, when working women went on strike, they utilized the subjectivities and languages they developed through popular culture practices to claim formal political status [although] they did not make their way into the broader language of radical politics.[22]

Enstad's explanation highlights the link between subjectivity and agency. But what none of these formulations seem to grasp is that subjectivity isn't something that can be 'formed, used, utilized, or developed' as though it were an unarticulated 'identity' of some sort or the internalized psychological manifestation of an externalized political agency. Rather than being an assumable quasi-identity (as the commonly used term, subject 'position', would seem to imply), subjectivity is the *effect* of an on-going process of subject production that all subjects must keep up in order to become and remain culturally intelligible to themselves, to their families, to their communities, and to the state.

Judith Butler on Subjectivity and Agency

Judith Butler's recent work (since *Gender Trouble*) provides a particularly useful way to think about the ongoing process of subjection that produces and maintains subjectivity, and its connections to agency. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she explains that:

> The customary model for understanding [subjection] goes as follows: power imposes itself on us, and, weakened by its force, we come to internalize or accept its terms. What such an account fails to note, however, is that the 'we' who accept such terms are fundamentally dependent on those terms for 'our' existence . . . Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency.[23]

According to Butler, then, the subject cannot choose or reject the conditions under which it becomes and struggles to remain culturally intelligible. Furthermore, any agency the subject might exercise is necessarily a product of terms imposed by the social and cultural formations – 'discourses' or 'regulatory norms' are Butler's preferred descriptors – that set the terms of its emergence (as a culturally intelligible subject).

This emphasis on the process of subjection and on the subject's embeddedness in social structures goes a long way towards resolving the problems with agency identified by Johnson and Van Young. Although Butler doesn't reject the term outright, she too sees liberal notions of agency as ideological constructs that obscure the unavoidable constraints imposed on freedom of choice by our 'dependency on a discourse we never chose but that paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency'. Moreover, Butler's notion of subjected agency works equally well for both free and enslaved persons (or for men and women) because it stresses the role of subjection

in the assumption of agency and thus acknowledges the asymmetries of power that distinguish (and define) the two conditions. At the same time, Butler's understanding of the subject as dependent for its existence and thus its agency on the 'terms' of power, forces us to consider – as Van Young rightly insists we should – the 'social entity-structures to whose strait-jacketing effects on individual options for action the concept of agency is meant to be an antidote'.[24]

For historians of gender and sexuality, Butler's emphasis on the conditions of subjectivity and the process of subjection rather than on subject positions *per se* is important for two reasons. First, unlike liberal notions of agency which are theoretically gender neutral, subjectivity occurs directly through the sexing and gendering of the subject. (As Butler points out, 'it's a girl' or 'it's a boy' is the opening invocation in most modern American lives.) And the subject is always at risk of becoming culturally unintelligible should *he* or *she* fail to keep up the sexing and gendering process (i.e., by dressing 'inappropriately', by not marking the 'right' box on a bureaucratic form, or by using the 'wrong' restroom in a public facility.) The subject thus emerges or becomes culturally intelligible 'only within and as [a] matrix of gender relations'. It follows, then, that far from being independent external variables that influence the acting subject, gender and sexuality are central to our understanding of historical agency whether the agent in question is a powerful man or an enslaved woman.

Second, Butler's focus on the 'terms' or conditions that structure subjectivity helps us navigate the thorny historical problem of 'recovering' the subaltern experience. As Johnson's critique makes clear, we may not be able to recover the subaltern's voice whether as an expression of agency or even as the articulation of a subject position. We can however recover some sense of the historical '"circumstances" and "traditions" which interpellated them as subjects and conditioned the meaning of their actions'.[25] Moreover, historical projects aimed at recovering the conditions of subjectivity (as opposed to the voices of subaltern subjects) can address things like cultural practices and gender ideologies *and* account for individual and group motivation in a way that avoids the constraints and distortions of historical agency taken by itself, especially its tendency to dissolve structures into steaming puddles.

Does this mean throwing out the concept of agency altogether as Johnson advocates or regarding it as little more than an after effect of subjectivity as a cursory reading of Butler might suggest? Neither option seems practical nor useful. To my mind, the best solution is not to dismiss agency or subordinate it to subjectivity but rather to clarify the intimate relationship between the two. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler tempers her pessimistic account of subjection by positing a rupture that occurs when the subject (as an effect of power) exercises agency:

> The power that initiates the subject fails to remain continuous with the power that is the subject's agency. A significant and potentially enabling reversal occurs when power shifts from its status as a condition of agency to the subject's 'own' agency . . . If in acting the subject retains the conditions of its emergence, this does not imply that all of its agency remains tethered to those conditions and that those conditions remain the same for every operation of agency . . . in fact, the power assumed [by the acting subject] may at once retain and resist that subordination . . . this ambivalence forms the bind of agency.[26]

While continuing to insist on power's role in initiating and maintaining subjectivity, Butler here argues for 'a significant and potentially enabling reversal' that allows the subject to exercise agency. Agency is still tied to the conditions of the subject's emergence and the subject is still compelled to engage in endless self-production, but the acting subject (agent) is nonetheless capable of resisting and even altering the conditions of subjectivity – of acting, as Johnson puts its, 'in a fashion the historian identifies as being sufficiently self-determined'.[27]

For historians, then, Butler's formulation resolves the most serious theoretical problems with agency without dispensing with the concept altogether. This is so because seeing subjectivity as inseparable from the terms of the subject's emergence (the conditions of subjectivity) thoroughly grounds it in the particularities of the historical moment. As Butler explains, the subject

> bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making . . . seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent.[28]

If we accept this account of the subject as dependent on external 'terms' for its very existence and for any agency it might hope to exercise, then our attempts to answer the perennial question – 'What's at stake for historical actors?' – would properly begin with their on-going struggle to achieve and maintain cultural intelligibility, a struggle that can only make sense in the context of the historically specific social and cultural formations that set those terms.

In addition to their inherent historicity, subjectivity and agency (in Butler's formulation) are inextricably intertwined in a 'politics' of cultural intelligibility that the subject-to-be must negotiate in order to exercise agency. For historical practitioners, this powerful and unavoidable link between the two concepts means that even if we agree with Plotke and Spivak that agency is in no way 'superficial and inadequate with respect' to subjectivity (and I do), it is nonetheless impossible to explicate agency without first addressing the conditions of subjectivity that enable, shape, and constrain the acting subject. As Ortner notes: 'agency is not some natural or originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within the matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constituted) feelings,

thoughts, and meanings'.[29] Beginning our historical analyses with an examination of the conditions of subjectivity and the process of subjection rather than starting with the already active agent thus works to ensure that subalterns (in particular) are not alienated – as Johnson fears they often are – 'from [the] "circumstances" and "traditions" which interpellated them as subjects and conditioned the meaning of their actions'.[30]

A Research Program for the New History of Gender and Sexuality in Latin America

Butler also offers a research program of sorts, intended in her case for contemporary social theorists but with intriguing possibilities for historians of gender and sexuality. A critical analysis of the connections between subjectivity and agency, she argues, would involve three levels:

> (1) an account of the way regulatory power maintains subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the demand for continuity, visibility, and place;
> (2) recognition that the subject produced as continuous, visible, and located is nevertheless haunted by an inassimilable remainder, a melancholia that marks the limits of subjectivation;
> (3) an account of the iterability of the subject that shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned.[31]

The first level of analysis is straightforward enough. Many social and cultural historians of Latin America (several of them mentioned earlier in this article) have become increasingly attentive to the different registers of regulatory power – from large structures or formations like the honor/shame complex and gender/sex systems to institutional practices like education programs, public health campaigns, military training, prison regimes, and legal codes and procedures. They have also noted some of the ways in which these regulatory norms 'maintain subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the demand for continuity, visibility, and place'. At the same time, however, as Ornter notes in her critique of poststructuralist cultural analysis,

> the subjects in question . . . are defined largely in terms of political (usually subordinate) locations ('subject positions') and political (usually subordinate) identities – subaltern (in the colonial sense), woman, racialized other, and so on.

And while Ortner goes on to admit that 'this is not an unimportant exercise', she nonetheless clarifies that it

> is different from the question of the formation of *subjectivities*, complex structures of thought, feeling, and reflection, that make social beings always more than the occupants of particular positions and the holders of particular positions.[32]

Here again, Butler's focus on the *process* of subjection through which acting subjects are constituted and maintained helps us resists the temptation to conflate the acting subject with the site of its performance (its subject

position). Moreover it allows for reflexive ambivalence on the part on the acting subject, even when that reflexivity works to further subjection.[33]

On the surface at least, the second level of analysis seems too philosophical (or worse yet psychiatric) to be of much use even to theory-minded cultural historians. Butler argues, for instance, that subjectivity is constituted 'through a certain kind of preemptive loss . . . [that] inaugurates the subject and threatens it with dissolution'.[34] Although this preemptive loss remains literally inconceivable to the subject, it nonetheless 'continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive elements'.[35] Explained in these general psychoanalytic terms, the haunting of the melancholic subject seems an unlikely candidate for serious historical analysis. However when Butler turns to an in-depth discussion of gendered melancholia – 'the melancholic bind of having lost our sex in order, paradoxically, to become it' – all kinds of possibilities emerge.[36] For example, after noting that heterosexuality 'is cultivated through prohibitions . . . [that] take as one of their objects homosexual attachments, thereby forcing the loss of those attachments', she goes on to explain that 'becoming a "man" within this logic requires repudiating femininity as a precondition for the heterosexualization of sexual desire'. As a consequence, 'one of the anxious aims of his desire [to be a man] will be to elaborate the difference between him and her, and . . . to discover and install proof of that difference'.[37] The production of masculinity through the repudiation of femininity (especially in other men) and the elaboration of differences (between men and women) is familiar terrain for historians of gender and sexuality. So too is the anxiety that surrounds the production of male subjects.

Indeed much of the recent historical work on homosexuality and homophobia in Latin America deals precisely with these issues of repression and erasure, and their consequences for masculinized and feminized male subjects.[38] Historians of prostitution in Latin America have been equally attentive to its role as one of the 'founding repudiations' of the modern nation-state.[39] As these extensive historiographies demonstrate, feminized men and prostitutes often occupy the symbolic center of what Butler calls 'a domain of abjected beings' who populate

> those 'unlivable' and 'unihabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.

She concludes,

> In this sense, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation.[40]

Seen in the broad social and cultural context that most historians favor, abjection manifests itself in many different ways. For example, in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock

makes useful distinctions between abject *objects* like the clitoris and menstrual blood, abject *states* like the masturbatory imagination and hysteria, and abject *zones* like red light districts and battered women's shelters; between *agents* of abjection like policemen and nurses, and abjected *groups* like feminized men, prostitutes, and lesbians; and between *psychic* processes of abjection like fetishism, disavowal, and the uncanny, and *political* processes of abjection like police raids on vice zones. McClintock's exhaustive catalog of abjection gives us a good sense of the range and promise of what she calls 'a *situated psychoanalysis* – a culturally contextualized psychoanalysis that is simultaneously a psychoanalytically informed history'.[41] Moreover, for historians of gender and sexuality, the frequency with which the abject is gendered and sexed (usually as feminine) – highlighted in my editing of McClintock's examples – makes it an especially compelling analytical tool.

If scholars have begun to map the '"unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life' in Latin American societies, only rarely have they ventured into the uncharted waters of historic melancholia to explore the sense of preemptive and irreparable loss that haunts human subjectivity. In other words, while we have learned to write with some authority about the physical and even psychic costs of abjection for feminized men and prostitutes, we're less attentive to the price paid by 'ordinary' subjects as they engage in the compulsive iteration of the regulatory norms that enable their subjectivity. Individual experiences of melancholia are of course even more difficult for the historian to access than they are for the psychoanalyst, who at least has the benefit of a live patient to analyze. Despite the paucity of live subjects available for *situated* psychoanalysis, historians have a distinct disciplinary advantage when it comes to the analysis of the regulatory norms through which subjectivity is enabled, shaped, and maintained. What we have yet to do is press that advantage – to use our understanding of the historical conditions of subjectivity, first to identify subjectivity's 'founding repudiations', and then to decipher the traces of those repudiations in the subject's struggles to become and remain culturally intelligible. For example, another striking feature of McClintock's catalog of abjection is the ubiquitous violence (both explicit and implicit) that social groups and individual subjects deploy in their struggles to maintain coherence in the face of the abject's perceived annihilating force. These violent struggles show up in the historical record as everything from institutionalized violence like the persecution of witches and police repression of prostitutes and homosexuals to individual acts like gay bashing and wife beating. And in all too many instances, they succeed at what Julia Kristeva calls 'killing substance to make it signify'.[42] But while violence against the abject tends to draw the attention of historians (and journalists) it is too often explained in simplistic terms as the inevitable repression of deviance by moralistic authorities or as crude efforts to reinforce patriarchal authority. Both reasons make some sense but both are

insufficient because they fail to take into account the psychological processes that 'sparked' the violence in the first place: the generalized moral panics and individual fears of self-annihilation that result from the confrontation with the abject. If the sleep of reason produces monsters, then Butler's (and Kristeva's) insights into their role in the constitution of subjects helps explain the violence they provoke.

The third level of analysis calls for 'an account of the iterability of the subject that shows how agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned'.[43] As noted previously, Butler insists that although the subject is dependent for its very existence on 'the conditions of its emergence . . . the power assumed [by the acting subject] may at once retain and resist that subordination'.[44] The subject-as-agent's ability to oppose and transform 'the social terms by which it is spawned' results from the inherent instability of regulatory norms – an instability that is revealed and exacerbated by their constant reiteration. 'The compulsory character of these norms', she writes, 'does not always make them efficacious . . . hence, the anxious repeated efforts to install and augment their jurisdiction'.[45]

Her discussion of censorship in *Excitable Speech* clearly illustrates both the ambivalence at the heart of subjectivity and the inherent instability of the regulatory norms that enable it in the first place. 'Censorship', Butler contends,

> seeks to produce subjects according to explicit and implicit norms and . . . the production of the subject has everything to do with the regulation of speech. The subject's production takes place not only through the regulation of the subject's speech, but through the regulation of the social domain of speakable discourse. The question is not what it is I will be able to say, but what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all . . . *To move outside of the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject. To embody the norms that govern speakability in one's speech is to consummate one's status as a subject of speech*.[46]

Despite the constraints imposed by censorship's bounding of the 'domain of speakability', the compulsive iteration of regulatory norms sometimes crosses over into 'insurrectionary speech'. Butler's example is the radical re-signification of the word 'queer' by the gay community in the United States. Her description of the re-signification process, however, works just as well for other contested categorical terms:

> The name one is called both subordinates and enables, producing a sense of agency from ambivalence, a set of effects that exceed the animating intention of the call. To take up the name that one is called is no simple submission to prior authority, for the name is already unmoored from prior context, and entered into the labor of self-definition. The word that wounds becomes an instrument of resistance in the redeployment that destroys the prior territory of its operation. Such a redeployment means speaking words without prior authorization and putting into risk the security of linguistic life, the sense of

> one's place in language, that one's words do as one says. That risk, however, has already arrived with injurious language as it calls into question the linguistic survival of the one addressed. Insurrectionary speech becomes the necessary response to injurious language, a risk taken in response to being put at risk, a repetition in language that forces change.[47]

Although not as overtly insurrectionary as the re-signification of homophobic hate speech, the example of women throughout Latin America deploying the tropes of motherhood to the contest abuses of patriarchal authority *in the public sphere* provides an even better demonstration of the way that 'the name one is called' (grandmother, mother, wife, etc.) can produce 'a sense of agency from ambivalence, a set of effects that exceed the animating intention of the call'. The best known example is of course the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina but similar categorical challenges have characterized all kinds of women's (and to a lesser extent men's) political activities in Latin America from land seizures to soup kitchens to prostitutes' petitions.[48] A recent collection of essays on turn-of-the-century Mexico City's 'Famous 41' scandal provides a very different example of the way that 'the name one is called' can both subordinate and enable – in this case through the repeated 'citation' of the number 41 as the preferred signifier for male homosexuality in twentieth-century Mexican popular culture.[49] Although, in this instance, the number 41 persisted as 'injurious language' (as does 'queer' for that matter) it nonetheless provided a sense of identity, 'a sense of one's place in language', for the men who fell under its shadow. As Carlos Monsiváis notes:

> However much fear they keep inside, however much in secret they guard their orientation, the homosexuals of Mexico City no longer feel alone after the *Redada* [raid]; in a certain way, in the spirit of the interrupted party, the 41 – the sign of the tribe's existence – accompany them.[50]

Some Final Considerations

For all its considerable explanatory power, it is important to note that Butler's formulation of subjectivity and agency lacks sufficient historical, cultural, and situational specificity. Any historian would rightly insist that regulatory power, melancholic remainders, and the subversive iterability of the subject have assumed many different forms. Thus historical analysis of the conditions of subjectivity in Latin America would have to take into account changes over time and across the region's diverse cultures (whether broadly or narrowly construed). It would also have to *locate* those conditions in ways that Butler barely considers but that historians of Latin America have learned to insist upon. Cultural intelligibility is clearly place dependent since the conditions of subjectivity can be configured in many different ways depending on the site (self, family, community, nation, etc.) of the subject's emergence and on the subject's social position within that site (gender, race, class, age, etc.). That said, closer

theoretical attention to the intimate connections between subjectivity and agency, and the elaboration of a research program that engages those connections, should help historians of gender and sexuality in Latin America pull together or at least put into conversation the disparate strands of our wide-ranging field *and* ensure that its turmoil continues to be as productive as it has been up until now.

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Short Biography

Robert Buffington is an Associate Professor in the Women and Gender Studies Program at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He holds a Ph.D. in Latin American history from the University of Arizona and has taught previously in the history departments at Bowling Green State University and St. John's University (Collegeville). His publications include: *Criminal and Citizen in Modern Mexico* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); 'La "Dancing" Mexicana: Danzón and the Transformation of Intimacy in Post-Revolutionary Mexico City', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 14/1 (March 2005): 87–108; and 'Homophobia and the Mexican Working Class', in Robert McKee Irwin, Ed McCaughan and Michelle Nasser (eds.), *Centenary of the Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2003). His current project, *A Sentimental Education for the Working Man: Mexico City 1900–1910*, explores the impact of modernity on working-class male subjectivity as reflected in the early twentieth-century Mexico City satiric penny press for workers.

Notes

* Correspondence address: University of Colorado at Boulder – History Department, Hellems, Room 204, Boulder, CO 80309, USA. Email: robert.buffington@colorado.edu.

[1] Sueann Caulfield, 'The History of Gender in the Historiography of Latin America', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 81/3–4 (August–November 2001): 449. Caulfield's comprehensive review includes the extensive Latin American scholarship on gender. In contrast, this article

addresses the theoretical debate over agency and subjectivity within the North American academy and thus deals almost exclusively with North American scholarship.

[2] Elizabeth Hutchison, 'Add Gender and Stir? Cooking up Gendered Histories of Modern Latin America', *Latin American Research Review*, 38/1 (2003): 268.

[3] See for example Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy (eds.), *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1997); Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux (eds.), *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); William E. French and Katherine Elaine Bliss (eds.), *Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Latin America since Independence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007); Matthew C. Gutmann (ed.), *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Lyman L. Johnson and Sonia Lipsett-Rivera (eds.), *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Latin America* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997); Marit Melhuus and Kristi Anne Stølen (eds.), *Machos, Mistresses, Madonnas: Contesting the Power of Latin American Gender Imagery* (London: Verso, 1996).

[4] French and Bliss, *Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Latin America*, 23–4.

[5] Ibid., 24.

[6] Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), 2–3.

[7] Ibid., 3.

[8] Sherry B. Ortner, 'Subjectivity and Cultural Critique', *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 107.

[9] Walter Johnson, 'On Agency', *Journal of Social History*, 37/1 (Fall 2003): 113–24.

[10] Ibid., 115.

[11] Ibid., 118.

[12] Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810–1821* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 14.

[13] Walter Johnson, 'OAH State of the Field: Slavery' (28 March 2004), URL http://www.oah.org/meetings/2004/johnson.html, accessed 23 July 2007.

[14] See for example Cornelia Hughes Dayton, 'Recovering Agency, Recovering Voices', *American Historical Review*, (June 2004): 827–43. Dayton notes that 'for those who have come to see the term "agency" as too simplistic, vague, or overly sunny, James C. Scott's analytical terms "weapons of the weak" and "hidden transcripts" provide alluring alternatives'. Despite the appeal of these alternatives, she argues, in many cases agency 'is more open ended – puts us in less of a box – than counter-hegemony', especially when 'subordinate subjects . . . [don't] challenge the system of rule in systematic or revolutionary ways' (827). Her concluding remarks, however, acknowledge Johnson's objections to the term and ask the rhetorical question: 'Is agency the right word for the maneuverings of wily peasants and canny servants?' (842).

[15] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Plotke, 'A Dialogue on Democracy', *Socialist Review*, 24/3 (1994): 16.

[16] See for example Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989).

[17] Spivak and Plotke, 'Dialogue on Democracy', 14.

[18] Steve J. Stern, *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[19] Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, 61–2. In fairness to Stern and others, historical (as opposed to enthnographic) work on domination and resistance, especially in the more distant past, is limited by the availability of sources. Given these serious constraints, Stern's account is unusually attentive to 'ambivalences and ambiguities'.

[20] Thomas Miller Klubock, 'Writing the History of Women in Twentieth-Century Chile', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 81/3–4 (August–November 2001): 509.

[21] Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 124, 243.

[22] Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), 13.

[23] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.

[24] Van Young, *Other Rebellion*, 14.
[25] Johnson, 'On Agency', 118.
[26] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 12.
[27] Johnson, 'OAH State of the Field: Slavery'.
[28] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 20.
[29] Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, 110.
[30] Johnson, 'On Agency', 118.
[31] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 29.
[32] Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory*, 114–15 (her italics). Butler notes that 'sexed positions are not localities but, rather, citational practices' and must therefore be '*repeatedly* assumed'. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 108.
[33] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 22. Butler's fascinating argument about 'the doubling back of desire that culminates in reflexivity' is too complex to reproduce here.
[34] Ibid., 23.
[35] Ibid., 134.
[36] Ibid., 166.
[37] Ibid., 136–7.
[38] See for example, Balderston and Guy, *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America*; Gutmann, *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America*; Melhuus and Stølen, *Machos, Mistresses, Madonnas*; Robert McKee Irwin, Edward J. McCaughan, and Michelle Rocío Nasser (eds.), *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, 1901* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2003); Pete Sigal (ed.), *Infamous Desire: Male Homosexuality in Colonial Latin America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003); James N. Green, *Beyond Carnival: Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Matthew Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); Robert Mckee Irwin, *Mexican Masculinities* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Jorge Salessi, *Médicos maleates y maricas: higiene, criminología, y homosexualidad en la construcción de la Nación Argentina, 1871–1914* (Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo, 1995).
[39] On prostitution in Latin America see for example Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); Sueann Caulfield, *In Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991). Guy, for example, notes that 'if women's . . . roles linked family and nation, then women who existed outside traditional family structures threatened the nation' (3).
[40] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3. In her definition of the term 'abjection', Butler notes abject zones threaten the subject with 'psychotic dissolution' as it insists that 'I would rather die than do or be that!' (243, note 2).
[41] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), 72 (her italics). McClintock's argument resembles the one presented in this essay but finds its primary inspiration in the work of Julia Kristeva, especially *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982).
[42] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984), 75. For a historical analysis that seeks to connect male subjectivity and violence against women see Robert Buffington, 'La violencia contra la mujer y la subjectividad masculina en la prensa popular de la Ciudad de México en el cambio del siglo', in Claudia Agostoni and Elisa Speckman Guerra (eds.), *De normas y transgresiones. Enfermedad y crimen en América Latina (1850–1950)* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2005).
[43] Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 29.
[44] Ibid., 12.
[45] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 237.

[46] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 133 (her italics).
[47] Ibid., 163.
[48] See for example, the essays in John French and Daniel James (eds.), *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998) and Jocelyn Alcott, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano (eds.), *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). Prostitutes' petitions to the Mexican government are analyzed by Katherine Elaine Bliss in '"Guided by an Imperious, Moral Need": Prostitutes, Motherhood, and Nationalism in Revolutionary Mexico', in Carlos A Aguirre and Robert Buffington (eds.), *Reconstructing Criminality in Latin America* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 167–94.
[49] Irwin, McCaughan, and Nasser, *Famous 41*. The scandal was generated by a 1901 Mexico City police raid on a private party which resulted in the arrest of 41 men, 'half' of them dressed as women. Butler explains the implications of 'citationality' in *Bodies That Matter*, 12–16.
[50] Carlos Monsiváis, 'The 41 and the *Gran Redada*', in Irwin, McCaughan, and Nasser, *Famous 41*, 164.

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