

Coda to “Quemando el parquet”: the concept of abjection and its usefulness for understanding santiagueño migrants

I wanted to add a brief note concerning my use in the paper of the concept of abjection. My reasons are twofold. One is that as several readers of the larger chapter from which the paper is taken have pointed out the concept is radically underdeveloped in the text. A few selected quotes from Butler have been worked into the narrative which has largely been left to carry the burden of the – implicit – theoretical underpinnings of the argument that is being made. I think that if a category like abjection is to be used then it needs to be explicitly theorized. And this raises the second reason. It is not entirely clear to me (to us, since this is a joint text) that the concept is useful or appropriate in helping us understand the construction of a potent regional identity among santiagueño migrants in an urban industrial center such as Berisso, nor in advancing our understanding of the complex construction of a working class political culture that emerged out of the intersection between internal migrants and other working class constituencies. What does the concept add that could not be just as effectively conveyed by other means? Is it simply an example of the anxiety of influence, the inferred legitimation that comes from invoking the name of such a heavy hitter as Butler? Does the use of the concept in this context itself offer too many hostages to fortune, is it not freighted with too much collateral damage attendant on its complex theoretical provenance? To be frank I/we don't know. Or more correctly we differ somewhat in our evaluation.

On the most obvious level there would seem to be reasons for caution in adapting the category to the case of santiagueño migrants. While there is certainly a literature which takes contemporary migrants (especially illegals) as constituting abjected subjects it could be argued that historical specificity is crucial here. The specific citation that I took from Butler uses the case of Turkish *gastarbeits* to sustain an argument about abjected bodies and their discursive lives. It should be said that Butler herself is reluctant to offer examples of cases beyond those of sexual/gender subject construction that underlie her work. When pushed by her two interviewers she offered the treatment of *gastarbeits* as an example. This seemed to me a suggestive clue as to the function of categories such as *cabecita negra* and the othering of internal migrants. And yet as my collaborator Mirta Lobato immediately pointed out the differences are enormous. Any attempt at a direct comparison falls at first sight. Santiagueño

migrants were fully legal citizens who were – in formal terms – integrated into a posited national community. Indeed, their honored place in that community was symbolically asserted in the discourse of Argentine nationalism. Historically Santiago was honored as the first Spanish settlement and culturally Santiago was taken to be the repository of a truly authentic national culture. There were, moreover, no discriminatory practices directed at santiagueños (or any other internal migrants).

Why then use the notion? I should offer a few initial clarifications. First, what attracted me was Butler's specific use of the concept especially in "Bodies that Matter". This is a necessary clarification because abjection clearly has a longer more complex history. I am not trying to contribute to that larger history. While there is clearly a connection between Butler's use of the category and Julia Kristeva's earlier use I am not attempting to derive anything from Kristeva's far more psychoanalytically framed concept with its rooting in the Oedipus Complex and the infant's separation (casting out) from the mother's body. It could be argued, of course, that Butler is herself operating within a sort of Zizeckian (Lacanian) psychoanalytical account of subject formation that as Julia McKenzie says "holds that the subject is formed through a founding act of foreclosure". Hence the import too of the "constitutive outside" against which any subjectivity struggles (ultimately in vain) to establish a coherent identity. The reason why this is ultimately in vain is that any subject formation is ultimately premised on a repression, a foreclosure that excludes an "other" – and it is this excluded, expelled, foreclosed outside that is inhabited by abject bodies.

The attraction of this framework for me was that it seemed to give some purchase on understanding the functioning of the category of *cabecita* and the allied stereotypes and urban legends found within working class communities in Argentina. In particular, I was intrigued when I read Butler's statement that abjection could be applied to racialized forms of abjection in her interview with Irene Costa Meijer and Baukje Prins. As I try to argue in the paper I think that *cabecita* was ultimately a strongly racialized category. In that sense, then, I was actually more taken initially with the implications of this for working class subject formation which, I argued, was accomplished in a community like Berisso by the construction of this racialized constitutive outside whose discursive traces could still be found in the ubiquitous presence of the *cabecita quemando el parquet* legend and its attendant stereotypes.

But, as I also tried to show in the paper, Butler's argument also allows for the life of the abjected other who she insists has a presence that lives within discourse. Part of the problem in thinking the life world of the abjected other is precisely that since his/her constitution is founded on "a trauma that itself cannot be directly symbolized in language" (Butler) the interrogation of oral or written texts – a basic method of the historian – is a problematic tool. I suspect that our analysis of the semi-spoken, indirectly articulated voices of the first generation santiagueños that Mirta interviewed in 1986 as they struggle to deal with the "mote infamante", *cabecita* speaks directly to this sort of founding trauma and the argument would have benefitted if it had been far more explicitly founded in this epistemological question. It was in fact only when we began to write the first section of the chapter (illogically after the second and third sections that deal with the development of the santiagueño community in Berisso after the arrival of the migrants – the sections which provide the elements of this paper) that we began to think more deeply about the implications of this issue. As we tried to offer a reconstruction of the life world of the *parajes* and the psycho-cultural baggage the migrants brought with them to Berisso we had to think more closely about what we might call the discursive history of santiagueño bodies. Butler is insistent that there is always a **production** of the abject and that this is ultimately a discursive process (in response to Meijers' and Prins's question, "so abjection is a process, a discursive process? She replies "I think, so yes! It has to be"). If this is a process of production then each case of abjection has to have a history, a specific set of discursive conditions bounded in time and space and open to change and elaboration. Butler herself suggests that one of the vehicles for the transmission of this discursive historically situated experience of abjection is the body. "I think that discourses do actually live in bodies. They lodge in bodies; bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood. And nobody can survive without in some sense being carried by discourse".

So let me try and offer a few examples of the historically situated discursive production of abjection as it relates to santiagueño migrants at the time they left the Santiago countryside and arrived in Berisso.

If we take a foundational text such as Orestes Di Lullo's "El folklore de Santiago del Estero" first published in 1943 and still our main source of information about Santiago popular culture. The interpretative narrative in the

form of authorial comments on the bearers of the santiagueño traditions and practices, the campesino, constructs a vision of a society corroded by the twin evils of the destruction of the natural habitat attendant on the arrival of the logging companies and the railways and the impact of mass migration out of the santiagueño countryside. This has undermined and disarticulated what in Di Lullo is expressed as an idealized rural society that had existed until the last third of the 19th century but which had its *época de oro* in the colonial era. The effect on the rural santiagueño male is a theme reiterated throughout the book. Thus, in a section on dances and fiestas we find the following:

Nuestro hombre de campo es triste. Partícula de una sociedad sin vínculos estables, sin cohesión, ni unidad; exhausto de impulsos; exprimidos de sus posibilidades humanas por el trabajo que lo convierte en un paria, el santiagueño termina por ser vencido por el excepticismo y la amargura. Ni siquiera su dolor es fuerte; ese dolor de su impotencia. Lo ha sepultado en la resignación de una vida contemplativa, bajo la costra filosófica de conformismo y no se advierte en él la llaga viva del dolor sangrante.

This and other similar descriptions have an almost Agambenian quality conjuring up the “bare life” of the migrant worker. Indeed we should note the presence of the word **paria** as an almost casual synonym for the campesino. Paria is a word that we find used in other discursive sites to connote the oppressed, the downtrodden. It is present in anarchist literature in the early decades of the century. It is also present in the poetry of Almafuerte who refers to the newly industrialized plebian classes as “*esas dolientes familias de parias*”. But here something rather different is meant. This is not part of a lexicon of protest, a discourse of rebellion. It has rather the implication attached to a sober sociological category. *Paria* of course has an Indian origin and is a Tamil word referring to those of the very lowest caste, or those outside the caste system altogether. It enters Portuguese around the mid 16th century and soon after is found in both Spanish and English. I would suggest that Di Lullo’s use of it here is very much intended to evoke its original sense. One of the synonyms of pariah in the English dictionary is outcaste – which could refer to someone so marginal, so outside the pale as to be beyond the hierarchical order of society (again Agamben’s *homo sacer* comes to mind). And, of course,

abject comes from the Latin *ab iacere*, to throw from, to cast out, to place outside. To be a pariah is to be abject in this most literal sense. Merriam also offers us secondary meanings of abject that mimic those of Di Lullo's passage: to be cast down in spirit, servile, spiritless; showing hopelessness and resignation.

What I would suggest is that Di Lullo (and in fact others of his grouping of regionalist intellectuals many of whom were members of the cultural club, *La Brasa* in Santiago) is in part engaged in his text in making the bodies of rural santiagueño workers (especially male bodies) intelligible to the civilized, lettered world. And yet this is itself a sign of the problem (of abjection) implicit here. When the champion of santiagueño popular culture has to translate (make intelligible) to the civilized the unintelligible rural poor the very act of translation itself both constitutes and reaffirms their abject status. It is precisely this lack of social, cultural – ultimately human – intelligibility that for Butler constitutes the abject. I would also suggest that part of what is going on in these texts as they both reflect and produce abjection is that they achieve their effect through ontologization. Di Lullo, and regionalist discourse in general constructs an essentialist, unique santiagueño who displays an essence, a unique way of being in the world. Again Butler would seem to be relevant here. In many ways “*Bodies that Matter*” is dedicated to arguing against an ontological understanding of bodies and she extends this critique of ontology to its effects on abject bodies: “to live as such an (abject) body in the world is to live in the shadowy regions of ontology”. Once again Di Lullo performs the task of translating this essential being; and this is an essential task for the regionalist project since the very radical alterity of the rural poor threatens the intelligibility and future political potential of any project that would attempt to rescue them. (I would also argue that the issue of intelligibility is at the root of a number of fundamental tropes present in the discourse of santiagueñidad – present both in texts such as those of Di Lullo or in the political rhetoric of Perón's speeches to his santiagueño public in 1953. These include especially the tropes of silence, dissimulation, indirectness, modesty – all taken to be essential parts of a particular santiagueño way of being in the world).

We can see a similar process at work if we look at the articles that Roberto Arlt wrote in 1938. Sent to Santiago by the Buenos Aires newspaper, "El mundo" to investigate the impact of the drought, he sent back seven extraordinary reports that described in almost Dantesque terms the conditions he found in Santiago. Once more the problem of intelligibility, translation and abjection seems paramount. In one of the articles, "La angustiada búsqueda del agua", Arlt is unflinching in his descriptions of abjected bodies. The poor rural women who desperately search for water are "mujeres demacradas, envejecidas" and are accompanied by their "desdichados niños" who are "tan sucios y haraposos" as them. They present Arlt with a basic problem of intelligibility. He asks the question of his porteño audience, "Qué diré de aquellas mujeres?....Pueden imaginarse lo que es caminar de pie en picadas de tierra ardiente, una legua, dos leguas cargando sobre la cabeza una lata de agua que pesa quince kilos?" And he answers his own question, "No, yo creo que uds no pueden imaginarselo". Arlt searches for an analogous referent that might be intelligible to his public the status of these women. He finds it in the ultimate site of radical alterity: Africa. His audience will be able to imagine, he says, the via crucis that santiagueñan women experience if they think of African women who walk for many miles loaded as beasts of burden with stacks of charcoal on their heads.

It would seem to me, then, that developing this original moment of complex historical trauma might provide the sort of situating that would justify the use of a category such as "the abject" and in the case of the cabecita the way that the discursive production of a such a category was ultimately experienced and lived. And part of this operation would involve serious engagement with the linked notions of nostalgia and melancholy and their function as sort of ideological mechanisms dedicated to the suturing of the original trauma and its sequels.