

Epilogue

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Beyond Policías y ladrones: an epilogue to liminality?

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1 Beyond policías y ladrones

In the chapter by Inmaculada García-Sánchez, the children play a game of cops and robbers. Los policías who try to keep everyone in check chase those who are seen as robbing the pueblos, extracting everything they can for their own individual benefit. The game serves to uncover children's true interactions during this activity, considered liminal to classroom instruction. The image of the policías y ladrones haunts this *IJSL* issue, as we grapple with whom is liminally positioned and why? And how is liminality constructed and why? In grappling with the image of cops and robbers, we are invited to consider an alternative – a world that goes beyond the patriarchal and capitalist ontology of domination, control, and appropriation. This volume is precisely about reflecting on the alternative to the categories of policías y ladrones that dominate our present capitalist colonial civilization.

The volume relies on the anthropological concept of liminality that was originally formulated by Turner (1967), drawing from the work on rites of passage rituals of early twentieth century French folklorist and ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep (1909). According to Turner, liminal spaces and times permit us to feel a disorientation that allows us to withdraw from normal modes of social action, so that new understandings and actions can emerge. Liminality, Turner poses, refers to the processes of transitioning across borders, of passing through a threshold.

The chapters in this volume take up this notion of liminal space and time in ways that go beyond the “passing” understandings that we gained from Turner. As the editors say, these chapters go beyond understanding liminality as transition between states, and considers instead how it operates, very often concurrently, at various levels of social organization. The participants in these stories seem suspended in a time/space that sometimes allows us to “see” them as themselves, with

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their own social actions, with their own languaging, and without being pushed to a different state of action and knowledge that is populated by more cops and robbers. The participants in this liminal space are cultivating ways of knowing and acting based on a *revolución* of thought and cognition, a new awareness of the interdependence of everything that exists. The answer is not to control or possess, but to see ourselves as being interconnected, interdependent, collaborating in relationships. This is precisely the most important contribution of these chapters – to reflect on how being positioned in a liminal time/space can be experienced as an alternative to a world of cops and robbers.

In this Epilogue I reflect from the cracks that these chapters open for us through the concept of liminality. I start by reflecting on the temporal (or not) condition of liminality, as I (along with the editors) put the traditional anthropological concept in conversation with an analogous one offered by Gloria Anzaldúa and other Latina decolonial scholars –borderlands/nepantla. I then discuss what I consider to be the three major contributions of these chapters – its serious and long-range ethnographies, the analysis of the role of institutions and especially schools in the construction (or not) of liminalities, and finally, the role that language has had in these constructions.

2 An epilogue to liminality?

In the classic Turner sense, liminality is a transition period, but the liminal spaces considered in these chapters are not simply transitional or a simple bridge to the same social structure, logic, order and classification of what Mignolo (2000) has called the colonial matrix of power. That is why writing an epilogue is difficult, since mine is not a concluding act, but a reflection from the cracks that the liminal spaces in these chapters open.

Poor, Black, Indigenous, women, sexual minorities, displaced persons, children and youth are situated in liminal states, perpetuated by societal institutions where *policías* keep everyone in check and robbers instigate fear to force conforming to an oppressive state. How then is it possible to imagine this liminal space as unchecked by cops and robbers and able to bring some measure of liberation?

To answer this question, the two Latina editors place Turner's liminality alongside that of borderlands/nepantla developed by Latina decolonial scholars. Gloria Anzaldúa used the Nahuatl word *nepantla* to mean "entre medio," a state that is neither the original one before colonization nor the one after, but where indigenous, dominated, and enslaved people can act according to their own epistemologies and can achieve their full potential and promise, free of the logic of a colonial capitalist society. According to Anzaldúa, *nepantla* transcends duality and recognizes

the in-between spaces in which minoritized communities dwell and where possibilities and transformations can occur. In this nepantla, one can tap into what Anzaldúa calls “el cenote,” “an inner underground river of information” (2002, p. 6), “a subterranean reservoir of personal and collective knowledge” (p. 66). This cenote pushes against racial, sexual, linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries, “[r]igid borders [that] hinder communication and prevent us from extending beyond ourselves” (p. 66). Anzaldúa calls for nepantleras who function disruptively. She adds: “like tender green roots growing out of the cracks, they eventually overturn foundations, making conventional definitions of otherness hard to sustain” (2002, p. 84). To act like nepantleras, Anzaldúa recommends activism, a notion that she describes as “putting our hands in the dough and not merely thinking or talking about making tortillas. It means creating spaces and times for healing to happen, espacios y tiempos to nourish the soul” (p. 89). Other Latina decolonial feminists have also described this nepantla location as infused with the liberating potential of liminal life (see, for example, Espinosa-Miñoso 2014; Lugones 2008; Ortega 2016; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012).

García-Sánchez and Mangual, as well as the authors here included, function as nepantleras, taking over foundational concepts in anthropology such as liminality and extending it in ways that do not lose sight of how normal modes of social action have sustained racism, patriarchy, linguisticism, capitalism. This volume subverts the heteropatriarchal capitalist colonial modernity which has been claimed as the only dominant worldview, showing us the value of different modes of understanding, of a space/time/territory that the decolonial Colombian anthropologist Escobar (2021) has called a territory of “relationality.” This space/time transitioning does not put us on “the other side,” but brings ourselves as humans into view, as we share, care and interconnect.

The analysis in these chapters looks inside the liminal/nepantla, across different levels of structuring and scales ranging from the macro – the sociopolitical context – to the micro – interactional events. The looking into nepantla/liminal states focuses at times on different types of subjects, other times on a temporal or spatial dimension. The participants in these chapters occupy and expand the liminal space, offering not an exit from it, but a way of re-embedding themselves in a space constructed with different understandings from that of a capitalist patriarchal racist society.

I write this Epilogue as women in the United States have lost their right to abortion after 50 years. Since *Roe v. Wade* (1973) women have had the right to choose whether to give birth or not. We had been fooled to think that we were on the other side of the threshold that had been carefully guarded by a patriarchal order. But in a single moment, we realized we had been tricked. How does it feel to live in a nepantla/liminal state, where there seems to be no transition to a different world

order? How do women, and especially women whose bodies are racialized, create change, struggle, resist and re-exist against this system? The answer lies in not transitioning or adapting to patriarchy, but in embracing women's and other marginalized groups' collective wellbeing as their/our own right. We must ensure that our heridas bleed into other spaces and create a system of interconnectivity where many worlds fit and become ours, what Arturo Escobar has called a "pluriverso" (2018). But to create this pluriverso we must have stories, visions and ethnographies, a major contribution of this volume.

3 Ethnography and liminality

The potential of the liminal/nepantla state is not simply constructed theoretically in this *IJSL* issue. Instead, these authors contribute serious ethnographic research that enables us to see children and youth actions within these liminal/nepantla states. The lives and actions of children and youth, as well as the socio-political/institutional circumstances in which they are immersed are described carefully and deeply. Whether in a school for poor children in Lebanon from 2014 through 2017 (Abu El-Haj); in Cyprus from 2006 through 2013 when Greek-Cypriot teenagers follow a Turkish-language class (Charalambous); of Moroccan immigrants in Spain interacting with others since 2000 (García Sánchez); of indigenous Maya students in an elementary school in Northern California for three and a half years (Baquedano-López & Mendes); of Maya-speaking Guatemalan Youth in Los Angeles for six years (O'Connor & Canizales); or in a centro de acolhimento for displaced children in Angola for a year, the deep ethnographic work of these scholars enable us to see and hear actions within these liminal/nepantla states in relationship and without external "noise." The researchers have taken a long-term view, enabling the representation of children and youth's actions not as static, but as changing and shifting. In O'Connor's and Canizales' chapter we clearly see the shifts in discourse practices and understandings at different points of the Indigenous youth' lives.

The ethnographies not only deeply immerse us in understanding and listening to the children and youth' discourses and actions, but also in feeling with them. We become enraged when Abu El-Haj describes teachers talking about children "like animals in a zoo." And we enjoy Mimón's furious interaction with Ramón as he breaks all school norms, but also a cycle of abuse, when he exclaims: "¡Vete a tomar por culo!" With this curse, Mimón expands the liminality of his nepantla, reaching into his cenote as his reservoir of strength, and re-existing through his words as independent of the school norms and of a racist society that has kept him in check.

It is interesting that ethnographers have been noted to be always in a liminal state, both observing and participating, an outsider and insider at the same time.

Thus, the ethnographies contained herein are important contributions, for the liminal spaces/times of the chapters contain within them another liminality. The participants in the chapters act within a liminal time/space. The ethnographers of the chapters also act within their liminal time/space. In so doing, the ethnographies here are like nesting cubes, each reflecting not only the participants' liminal positions, but also that of the researchers. This is especially relevant in the case of the editors and authors of this volume, most of them members of racialized minoritized groups themselves. The relationality between subject participants in the ethnographies and the ethnographers themselves is an important contribution of this volume. In many ways, the ethnographies act as exorcisms of the researchers' own liminal positions, going beyond the barriers and boundaries to which they have been subjected and embracing a collective well-being potentialized by a relational space. As Baquedano-López states in her chapter, the ethnographies offer the researchers ways to understand the "interstitial and racialized categories" in their own family backgrounds.

Children and youth spend a large amount of time participating in schools. Thus, many of the ethnographies in these chapters are of poor, racialized, displaced children in schools and other socializing institutions where they are either educated into social liminalities or where they find liminal spaces for liberation.

4 Education and liminality

In describing the precarious education of poor kindergarten children in Lebanon, Thea Abu El-Haj describes how school makes liminality a permanent, rather than temporal condition. In fact, it is education that produces the marginalized social identities of these children and families.

Much schooling consists of a ritual process that is unlike the rites of passage that Turner described. Education exerts a normative function, a sorting of students into cops and robbers through discipline and establishing hierarchies of power and obedience. And yet, even in these authoritarian spaces there are liminal zones – snack times, hallways, playgrounds – where children break out of the social order and take control. Abu El-Haj explains that it is in these betwixt and between where children "asserted their agency and took control of their lives, however briefly." The question would be: how can we turn these liminal spaces into spaces where educators and children can reweave their relations to each other based on care and respect?

It is in this liminal/nepantla state where/when we clearly view the reservoir of understandings and resources that the participants in the ethnographies enjoy. This is the importance of focusing on the liminal, for it enables us to understand that

within that space/time one can become liberated from norms and structures that limit us. It is in the interstices of institutional/schooling structures that the potential of humanity flows uninterrupted.

Although most chapters study children in the interstices of actual schools, some study the actions of youth in community spaces, including, for example, an informal support group for unaccompanied youth (O'Connor & Canizales) and private residential centers for displaced children (Nazimova). But regardless of the structural condition of the institution, all the poor racialized children and youth in these chapters are placed in the peripheries of socio-institutional structures and deprived of the care they deserve. And yet, the deep ethnographies contained herein let us see in the cracks an alternative world in which the children and youth are embedded with potential and possibilities through their ability to act. In so doing, they develop an awareness of interdependence and embrace the relationality of a collective well-being. As youth reflect on their own ideologies and that of others, they consider different possibilities of being, of languaging, of acting. And in so doing, they shift their attention from their own individual lives to that of communal participation that is generative of the potentiality of a different world. It is through language that this communal consciousness is constructed, another important contribution of this volume.

5 Language and liminality

This volume studies how a liminal *nepantla* is constructed through everyday language and interaction, and how this language use, this liminal talk, functions. Sometimes language is crucial to the identity construction of marginalized youth. Other times it is central to processes of exclusion and belonging.

Throughout these chapters it is the communicative practices that position the children and youth in liminal precarious positions. The racial, patriarchal, capitalist ideologies are clearly embedded in the everyday discourse of the institutions in which these children and youth operate. And yet, it is also through language that the children find spaces to construct different identities. Language is the anchoring point of the liminal/*nepantla* in which these children and youth act. The role of language is especially evident in the chapter by Patricia Baquedano-López and Mendez where the Yucatec Maya children in California construct their multiplicitous selves through translanguaging. As the children experience their lives traveling to other worlds, they acquire not only new ways of doing language but also new ways of being, of knowing and of doing. It is in the interrelationship of language practices that these Yucatec Maya children regenerate themselves, as they draw from their multilingual practices and transnational lives to construct

new identities. It is also through their translanguaging that they develop what Baquedano-López calls a diasporic consciousness, that is, a critical consciousness of their situatedness in the liminal/nepantla state in which they live. The key to survival for these children lies in relational epistemologies, in acknowledging others' language and cultural practices, and on their own agency in learning how to relate to all of it. Baquedano-López and Mendez state: "translanguaging practices not only thrived in the indeterminacy of the liminal, they advanced new forms of language, disrupting strict code boundaries." A girl in the ethnography, Cati, claims this "idioma de como de Yucatán," "similar al español," sin nombre/without a name. She not only claims that this language is her own and that of her friends and family ["we invented it"], but it is also a recognizable community practice ["many people know how to speak it"]. Baquedano-López and Mendez remind us that this is reminiscent of Anzaldúa's theorization that multiple discursive practices enable minoritized bilingual people to communicate "realities and values true to themselves" (1999: 77). The young children in the Baquedano-López/Mendes ethnography, and their families, build coalitions with others, and develop a borderlands consciousness to disrupt the erasure of indigeneity at the school.

Despite the linguicism that these children – poor, indigenous, immigrants, displaced – experience, they learn to use language to negotiate the liminal dimensions of their experience, whether with institutional authorities, peers, or communities. They learn to tell stories in ways where language is used to maximize the potential of the liminal/nepantla state which they inhabit and develop an awareness of interdependence and relationality. We see children and youth negotiating their potential in liminal/nepantla spaces sometimes through translanguaging in the case of Maya children in the U.S., other times through cursing as in the example of the children in the chapter by García-Sánchez, yet other times through negotiations with authorities as in the chapter by Nazimova, and the one by Abu El-Haj. Children and youth understand how to manipulate language in ways that allow them to articulate new discursive frames that include them, as is evident in the political discourse of the Greek-Cypriot youths taking a Turkish language course in the chapter by Charalambous. It is these children and youth, supposedly liminally situated, that are disrupting monolingual monoglossic discourses, as well as whiteness and heteropatriarchy. The participants' languaging becomes the instrument to expand the circle, to go beyond the social, racial, linguistic borders that constrain them.

6 Liberating Cenotes

Cenotes, found mostly in Yucatán, México are not only underground caves where cool water flows, they are also sacred Mayan ceremonial spaces. Cenotes are formed

as the cave space enlarges when the water levels drop and rise, eventually thinning the cave roof which collapses as a sink hole is formed. Cenotes provide an apt metaphor for how the liminal space can enlarge and open up a different ecology, a transformative alternative that flows from below, an ecological, nonpatriarchal, nonracist society, a space for healing and nourishing the soul.

Marginalized children and youth may live in what appears to be a closed cave, but their “subterranean reservoir of personal and collective knowledge” (Anzaldúa 2002, p. 66), their cenote, may push against the racial, sexual, linguistic, cultural and national boundaries that keep them enclosed, and bring us closer to the sacred, to the spirit, to care and respect, aspects that modern secular society has placed outside its boundaries. As scholars, placing our hands “in the dough,” means shaping a world re-embedded with different understandings, and with a purpose to heal and nourish those who have been marginalized. This volume is an attempt to reveal how stories and ethnographies carved in the interstices of institutional structures show the flow of human potential. It brings into full view the reservoir of knowledge, potential, languaging and experiences of children and youth who are often portrayed as marginalized.

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