

Liminality and “People without history”: Chavez Chapter 3, Wolf Introduction

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- Chavez: Shadowed Lives: Chapter 3, Crossing Borders pp. 45-65
 - coyotes and pollos
 - the **liminal state**, “betwixt and between”
 - crossing
 - also, being in the US without documents
 - **liminal space**: the soccer field
 - what does this mean?
 - p.49: increased surveillance at the soccer field pushes migrants to cross nearer the All-American Canal along the California-Mexico border
 - update: over 500 drownings as of mid-2010
 - now many immigrants cross into Arizona, in extremely harsh and mountainous desert, where hundreds each year die of thirst and exposure
 - **vulnerability**: people in liminal states are typically at risk
 - in the more usual use of the model of rites of passage, this is due to being in a socially and morally undefined state
 - the risk is seen as supernatural, or socially abnormal
 - people in liminal states are thought to be more likely to have visions, see spirits, get divine inspiration, etc.
 - as in shamans who are on the border between this world and the supernatural
 - or young people on a vision quest as part of their rite of passage into adulthood
 - in Chavez’s the metaphorical use of the model of rites of passage for undocumented immigrants, this vulnerability is more literal
 - because they are not in a standard, legal status, they cannot count on the Mexican nor the US government to protect them from theft, assault, rape, murder...
 - unscrupulous (or predatory) coyotes, drivers, etc.
 - even if Border Patrol would, in fact, help them, they won’t seek or accept help for fear of being apprehended and deported
 - liminality extends to not carrying ID, so they cannot be identified when arrested and deported
 - what could be more liminal than being without any evidence of your own identity?
 - but also cannot be identified if there is an accident or crime
 - once in the US, undocumented immigrants remain liminal and vulnerable for a long time
 - they have to hide on the edges of the society to avoid detection
 - which denies them many forms of protection (from crime, disease, hunger, etc.)
 - incorporation into US society is blocked or greatly delayed, or they never even seek it
 - so they remain vulnerable
 - an ideal workforce that has to accept whatever low wages are offered, and cannot complain about working conditions, mistreatment, compensation or treatment for accidents, failure to pay, etc.

- Introduction to “Europe and the **People Without History**”, 1982, Eric Wolf
 - a classic, very well written, but in complex, literate, educated language
 - Wolf’s book is an attempt to correct common “western” views of the people and cultures of the rest of the world
 - that is, to correct ideas common among people in the core of the world system, about people in the periphery of the world system
 - that is, to correct ideas that contribute to the cultural hegemony of the cultures, countries, and people of the core over the cultures, countries, and people of the periphery
 - What is Wolf’s point in the Introduction (and in the title of the book)?
 - Europeans (the colonialist core of the world system) have tended to see “others” as
 - primitive
 - in an essential natural state
 - thus unchanging
 - they are seen as just being, for reasons based on their own cultural features
 - not as being the current state of a historical process of change,
 - not as the current result of active interaction with, influence from, and influence on, others around them
 - it was easy for Europeans to think this, because the “others”
 - did not appear in European historical records
 - had no written history of their own
 - or did have written history, but it was written in a language that Europeans did not read or care to study
 - civilized Europeans have history; these “others” were just there, static, until Europeans reached them
 - Europeans have been advancing, improving
 - while others have not, and so are behind, inferior
 - “The Pomo” or “The Maya”, frozen in a museum display case
 - this is misleading, not an accurate nor useful way of thinking
 - “The Pomo” at the time of contact were what they were as a result of past population movements, trade, and relations with neighbors
 - within a few years after contact, they had been radically changed by European disease
 - not long later, their settlements, beliefs, and daily behavior were strongly shaped by the presence of Spanish missions
 - and so on... “the Pomo”
 - but this view is very “useful”, in the sense of Steckley’s “useful knowledge”
 - it allows colonialists to feel justified in controlling colonized populations
 - since they are helpless, unsophisticated, unable to learn to handle things themselves
 - it absolves colonialists of responsibility for having created the very situations they take advantage of
 - thus conveniently allowing them to exploit the “others”
 - So, who are “the People Without History”?
 - Are they really “Without History”?
 - What would you say to people who complained that the title of Wolf’s book was ethnocentric or racist?