

[L] POSTGRADUATE SEMINAR
IN LIMINALITY STUDIES



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The Limen: (In)stability and Process

Book of Abstracts

THE THIRD POSTGRADUATE SEMINAR IN LIMINALITY STUDIES

UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE MADRID,
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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

ANA M^a MANZANAS

Universidad de Salamanca

TBD

Keynote talks information to come

POSTGRADUATE SPEAKERS

Elena Bermejo

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Formulaicity in Fanfiction: Iteration and the Tagging System

Fanfiction, as we know it, is inherently liminal. Its defining aspects, far from being fixed, are the centre of open discussions about its peculiarities—which concern, among other topics, its increasing recognition in culture juxtaposed with its dubious reputation as a “low” form of fiction; the controversy concerning the authorship of an original narrative that takes as basis an already existing work; or the intertextual complexities this kind of works entails. Thus, the conversation surrounding fanfiction’s nature and influence consistently identify fanfiction as a fluid, intermediate space in which its current features can be expected to undergo transformations, evolving into new forms, or perhaps being dismissed in favour of what become considered as subsidiary characteristics.

The focus of this research is one particular feature that may also benefit from a liminal analysis: the tagging system. Fanfiction tags consists of keywords supplied by fanfiction writers as metadata—in what is commonly known as a folksonomy—to facilitate the searchability as well as the indexing of works. However, although tags are usually considered as simple means of categorization, they have yet to be studied as descriptive elements that

encompass the whole structure of a fanfiction work. From this perspective, we find that tags may be codified and are not dissimilar to systems such as Propp's model for wondertales, where the plot of a wondertale may be summarized through a string of actions and events called "functions". This talk examines the tagging system of fanfiction vis-à-vis other forms of highly formulaic fiction, such as wondertales or formulaic narratives in popular culture; with the purpose of ascertaining how fanfiction, on the one hand, incorporates formulaic traits from these genres; on the other, may adapt or alter these elements. Thus, the exploration of the formulaic aspect of fanfiction emphasizes yet another of its liminal facets, where the encounter between the established canon and new forms of fiction may result in similar, yet uniquely distinct, features, further serving to define certain aspects of fanfiction's elusive nature.

Esme Broadbent

Universidad de Salamanca

Male Sensuality at the TV-Art Interface: *Alan Cumming, b.1965. Actor.*

(Christian Hook)

This paper explores the new space that arises when a work of art is produced as part of a television competition. The process of painting translates what is real or imagined into a physical medium; both the act of translation and the very physicality of the painting – the paint, the canvas, the frame – reminds us that art is a representation of something, not the 'real' thing itself. The filming process, on the other hand, works hard to remove the mechanics of production from the perception of the viewer; filmic paraphernalia is hidden from sight in order to create an immersive sense of 'reality'. In this way, and as expressed by Walter Benjamin, there is a great difference between art and film. This work explores the social potential of the space where these mediums collide.

This collision between the physicality of art and the virtuality of media is referred to by Kim Toffoletti as an interface, a space which undermines the subject-object binary and allows a fluid communication between the two. This communication is here explored through a study of the winning painting of one TV competition, *The Sky Arts Portrait Artist of the Year*, in which artists compete by painting celebrity portraits to win a £10,000 commission. The winning artist of 2014, Christian Hook, painted *Alan Cumming, b.1965. Actor.*, an expressive oil painting which depicts the actor in a semi-nude reclining position, looking seductively over his shoulder at the viewer. The production of the painting was a media performance – despite

the resulting physicality, it also exists as part of the virtual ether. I propose that this interface between the physicality of art and virtuality of TV has created a liminal space that allows a communication between subject and object free from tradition or expectation and where, in this instance, the sensuality of the male body is both reclaimed and proclaimed.

Elena Dobre

Universitat Jaume I, Valencia

In their introduction to *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature*, Viljoen and Van der Merwe allude at trauma as the shock disturbing both individual and collective chronicles: “When a person is overwhelmed by trauma, the coherence of the life narrative is shattered - the traumatized person has “lost the plot” and a void enters the structure of the narrative.” (2007, p. 1, my emphasis). I want to further this claim by arguing that trauma studies (as articulated by the Yale school in the early 1990’s) and liminality studies share discursive and structural affinities. My intention is to explore the dialectic co-implication of the two entities by claiming that both are coextensive and mutually determining insofar as the disruptive magnitude of trauma expels the su (A)bject into a psychic and socially construed marginal or liminal place, whose very essence is charged with further traumatogenic potency. Hence, by casting the individual into a place of alterity akin to the threshold, the metabolization of trauma delivers a liminoid individual whose re-integration into the fabrics of the fictive and sociocultural narration entails a necessary restructuring of both elements.

One of the authors whose bending of narrative texturizes the intersection between trauma and liminality, offering an unparalleled vantage point from which to explore their interrelation, is William Faulkner. The Southern author deploys a vast range of marginal, trauma-ridden individuals who “through their actions and circumstances, reveal the many facets and convoluted nature of liminality” (Watkins, 1994, p. 11). Thus, favouring the analysis of some of his central characters I will explore the way in which the limen is peopled by border/less subjectivities in terms of gender, sanity and racial identity. Moreover, it will be shown how Faulkner’s macrostructural organization mimics the morphology of the traumatic-liminal, whereby central events, due to their destabilizing magnitude, are routinely sent to the threshold of the narration, leaving a centric void which is in constant communication with the margins.

Andrés Guilló

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The Transition of Hip Hop: From Marginal to Mainstream Culture

When Hip Hop culture was taking its initial steps at the close of the 20th century, it functioned as a liminal, African American subculture developing at the margins of the dominant Euro American mainstream. It was certainly liminal, as several of its founding pillars (rap, breakdance, graffiti...) merged traits from clearly distinguishable categories. Because of its African American status, Hip Hop shares both African and European roots. Rap, perhaps its most representative element, displays both oral and written attributes. Graffiti on the other hand, combines artistic prowess with the writing of words. And yet, following the latest discussions on the concept of the liminal, one must necessarily acknowledge that a culture such as this cannot permanently cling to its liminal status at the margins of the canon. Hip Hop, just as African American culture itself, has nowadays become a distinct category, and takes on its own significant share of mainstream culture. The object of the present talk is to consider the process of transition — from margin to mainstream — undergone by two of Hip Hop's mentioned key elements: rap, and graffiti. To properly evaluate this process, this talk will also consider the great relevance of the financial element, as regards to the creation of normative/canonical categories within our postmodern, capitalist society.

Adele Guyton

KU Leuven

The Liminality of Travel and the Development of British Nationalism in

Gulliver's Travels and The Turkish Embassy Letters

In *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, Jonathan Swift and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu have little in common stylistically other than their contempt for the average 18th century British traveller and travelogue. These travellers and travel writers allegedly failed to think critically about what they saw, falling either into the wholesale, utopian praise of the cultural Other or complete disparagement of the Other functioning in praise of a burgeoning English national identity. In this paper I will show how on the one hand, Swift shows the dangers of the complete embrace of a foreign perspective or ideology through the example of Lemuel Gulliver. On the other hand, Montagu shows a stylised version of herself establishing

a liminal vantage point from which she can critically examine her own British culture while maintaining it as *prima inter pares*. At the close of both texts, the protagonists occupy liminal spaces between two cultures, but where Montagu is in a position to “rationally” observe the excellence of Englishness, Gulliver has become a self-loathing figure attempting to live as a horse. Following Srinivas Aravamudan, I will argue that the kind of liminal position advocated in different ways by both Swift and Montagu can be best articulated through the metaphor of inoculation. The kind of smallpox inoculation which Montagu appropriately brought back to Britain after her sojourn in Turkey is characterised by the dangerous introduction of live viral cultures into the subject through an open wound. When successful, it acted as a vaccination against disease. I will suggest that this metaphor of inoculation through critical engagement is applicable to both *Gulliver’s Travels* and *The Turkish Embassy Letters* and shows an attempt to wield the *limen* as brought about by travel to champion an empirical sense of nationalism.

Jennifer Harding

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Texts in Transition: Rethinking the Literature of the Early Medieval Period with a Liminalist Lens

The concept of “the Middle Ages” is, at the best of times, a remarkably vague term that is often understood as more concrete than what it actually entails; it is seen as a monolith and this view does not encompass the vast changes in both culture and physical boundaries that occurred steadily over the course of the age. Even if we are to take one sub-era, the Early Medieval period, any scholarship will run up against dichotomies and paradoxical elements born from clashing religions, mass migration, mixing languages and cultures, and swiftly changing borders. However, despite the nature of this era being so elusive, the scholarship of the last several centuries has mostly employed a(n) (often self-benefiting) rhetoric of binaries when defining the Early Medieval period (and in fact the Middle Ages as a whole). As a result, several aspects of the era became marginalised or confused, and readings of the texts produced in this era were likewise subjected to a black-and-white treatment that yielded limited and contradictory results. This now presents a problem for current scholarship, as we are seeing fractures and outright splits in the academic societies which dominate this field of study over how to better view and handle the evidence of the era, and interpretation thereof.

As a possible solution towards reconciling the disparate views on and slippery elements of the Early Medieval period, I offer liminality. Liminality highlights excluded middle

elements of binary systems, whether they be transitions or processes, or thresholds between established states where a blended state may flourish. Thus it may be the tool needed to help current scholarship not only tackle the literature (and other aspects) of the Early Medieval period, but also adapt itself in the wake of deconstructing the binary system to which most of our foundational scholarship belongs. This paper seeks to provide an example of how liminality may be used to reconcile certain problematic areas for Early Medieval scholarship, and provide groundwork for further research on the topic.

Valeria Iglesias

KU Leuven

The Animal(ity) in Me

There has been a growing interest in literary studies focusing on the nature of the animal, or rather the nonhuman animal, in relation to the human, for which a common point of departure is Jacques Derrida's essay *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*. In Derrida's analysis, however, the focus is almost exclusively placed on the human and what this confrontation entails for man rather than the animal. Animal studies have already focused on several aspects regarding the separation between the human and animal, the representation of animals in literature and matters of animal rights advocacy. Further discussions have branched from it, making room for *animality* studies, as 'work that emphasizes the history of animality in relation to human cultural studies, without an explicit call for nonhuman advocacy'¹. Moreover, as stated by Victor Turner, 'it is in liminality [...] that one finds profuse symbolic references to beasts, birds, and vegetation. [...] Thus, symbolically, their structural life is snuffed out by animality and nature, even as it is being regenerated by these very same forces'². This in-betweenness where nonhuman animals appear to be standing seems to not only speak for the nature of the animalistic, but also for the authors portraying them, bringing closer together the human and the nonhuman, aiming to establish a horizontal order instead of a vertical hierarchy. The purpose of this paper is to explore the spectrum between the human and the nonhuman, alongside an exploration of the realm where animality occurs and how it is not a fixed state for neither animals nor humans.

¹ Lundblad, Michael. "From Animal to Animality Studies." *PMLA*, vol. 124, no. 2, 2009, pp. 496-502.

² Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. 1974. Quoted in Aguirre et al. in *Margins and Thresholds*, 2000.

Quetzalina Lavallo Salvatori

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The Chronology of Water: The flux of becoming

‘How do you live on land?’ Asks the narrator in the first part of the memoir *The Chronology of Water*, written by the American author Lidia Yuknavitch. Her story of transformation and resurrection, she understood, was to be told through water, because as existence, it flows, changes constantly. Water in her story is death when leaving her stillbirth baby girl’s ashes in the sea, when it represents her failure to become a professional swimmer due to another, more distilled, form of liquid. But it also means life, where she feels safe, away from family and the role of daughter, away from an abusive father who is unable to swim and who eventually loses his memory from hypoxia, when you drown without dying, and he stops existing while breathing; when her water broke and give birth to her son Miles. Being in a body that felt dead through family scarring, a body that was to create live and gave birth to a dead baby, Yuknavitch understood that water is the best way to convey her story of being, because being is transitioning, flowing and thus paradoxical and contradictory. And so, her story is the story of embracing and transforming, transforming her body, her sex, a source of shame, and embracing it as a symbol of power and cleansing through S&M, learning to cure pain through pain. Transforming words, language and literature, twisting it, letting go of linear structures, becoming a ‘language bandit’ and living for ‘the underbelly of literature’. She fought in the current, until she drowned and came back, ready to learn how to walk on dry land.

The intention of this essay is to explore the way in which the author expresses her process of healing through the symbol of water, creating a liminal space where stable categories such as ‘daughter’, ‘mother’, ‘literature’, ‘sex’, ‘life’, ‘death’, among many others are played with or problematized in such a way that she is able to subvert their meaning, mould them through contradiction, and be able to emerge from her fear and traumas purified.

Isabel Marqués

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Sleeping Beasts: Liminal Constructions of Space, Time and Subject in Ottessa

Moshfegh’s My Year of Rest and Relaxation

Ottessa Moshfegh’s fiction combines moral insight and grotesque fantasy, crossing the threshold between the realist and gothic traditions in American literature. In *My Year of Rest*

and Relaxation (2018), she presents an expensive, morally blank picture of New York in the advent of the 9/11 attacks. Her nameless narrator is a beautiful, wealthy, misanthropic young woman who, overwhelmed by her privilege, undergoes a year-long drug-induced sleep regime in an attempt to make sense of her own existence. Repelled by the social circles she frequents while viciously commenting on their psychic and moral decay, Moshfegh's heroine is characterised by a liminal subjectivity that is constantly problematized throughout the novel. While helping her escape from the schemes of ordinary life into a marginal space in society, her state of semi-hibernation drives her to a series of blackouts in which she unconsciously embraces attitudes that inform the patriarchal narrative of late capitalism. But despite the novel's dominant bleakness, the heroine's back-and-forth trip veers towards a moment of epiphany that enables her to embrace a collective, if temporary, subjectivity and a more complex understanding of humanity.

In this talk, I intend to read the novel in light of Turner's theories of productive liminality and more recent discussions on a necessary dialogue between ethics and contemporary fiction, considering Moshfegh's use of both realist and gothic modes. I argue that the heroine's successive interactions with the pre- 9/11 world, if already post-apocalyptic, ultimately negotiate the possibility to transform a space of self-confinement into a site of encounter with the Other. In sum, Moshfegh's interest in liminal characters as representatives of the fallacious nature of American utopias aligns with her portrayal of the country in a period of cultural and moral transformation that echoes a more familiar, contemporary space.

Vanesa Menéndez Cuesta

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W03ld W[ai]de C0c00n: SPAM-ing Net(I)Ana(S)

Traditional notions about positioning oneself in space and time have been dramatically challenged by the emergence of virtual realities that proliferate and populate the online sphere. With the Internet, unreal and mediated phantasies are apparently closer to become our immediate reality. Since time and space have been redefined by diverse and innovative technologies, nowadays we are still reconfiguring our notions of being, living and positioning oneself, which are determined by hectic fast-pace developments and which are surpassing, somehow, our human abilities to cope with reality.

In this paper, I would like to employ the *Alt Lit* poet Ana Carrete's metaphor of the Internet conceived as a "cocoon" in her poem "404 NOT FOUND" (*Why Fi*, 2014): the "cosy warm wide web /long silky envelope" that encloses us all, like a gigantic spider web catches its prey. This visual metaphor reminds one of an illustration created by British illustrator Polly Nor's "Stuck On You" (2015), which shows how multiple evil-red tentacles-like arms reaches out of a computer screen in order to rock a floating body, which is simultaneously holding a phone on one of her hands. Both metaphors, lyrical and visual, symbolize the emotional dependency on technology and the virtual that many Millennials struggle coping with.

Therefore, I will analyze the use of poetic metaphors related to Internet imagery in order to describe how this use is affecting our notions of identity, for which I would employ Zafra's concept of *netianas* in order to explore how Internet subject problematizes not only fixed categories of being, such as gender, class and race, but also re-configures posthuman immateriality. Conceiving the screen as "an interface" that "liminally join(s) our bodies to online relations" (Zafra 2015), I would like to present the ways in which mediation works as a key element in order to understand the *Alt Lit* poetry in the 'connected room' that we inhabit nowadays.

Simon Pritchard

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Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and the Mid-life Crisis as Liminal Phase

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Jaques seems to present the now familiar seven ages of man as a series of discrete periods, one following neatly after the other. However, a closer look at his speech reveals a more complex appreciation of the nature of aging. Firstly, the oft-quoted opening, "[a]ll the world's a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players", warns against seeing the phases of development as simply the biological processes of an aging body; they are also, to an extent, performances and it depends on the "player" how convincing these performances are. Also, there are lexical and semantic cross-references that connect the different periods of one's life, emphasizing their non-discrete, transitional nature (the infant's "puking", school-boy's "whining" and lover's "sighing"; the soldier "[f]ull of strange oaths" and the justice "[f]ull of wise saws"). Finally, one of the phases returns, to upset the simple linearity of the process, as the player enters the final chapter of life, described as a "second childishness and mere oblivion".

Jaques's namesake in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is the central character Jack Gladney, professor of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill and a man beset with fears of the "mere oblivion" that not only awaits him in the future, but that he senses in the culture all around him. DeLillo's novel is a mid-life crisis novel, which explores how the different phases of life are transitional, how the acting out of these phases is often a performance of varying plausibility and how each phase, while appearing to be discrete, can actually encroach upon, overlap with or return within a later phase.

It will be the purpose of this paper to explore how DeLillo, whilst displaying this liminal conception of the aging process, addresses possible answers to the following questions: What occurs in the period of transition between two stages of a person's life?; Does a series of events (biological and/or environmental) or a series of choices set this transition in motion? (if a question is phrased in this way, the answer is always, of course, both); Can a mid-life crisis be considered a liminal phase in someone's life and, if so, what does that person "bring back" from his or her liminal journey?; and, finally, What can we learn from the transitions in Jack's life about the wider cultural, political and historical transitions that are occurring in his, late twentieth century, epoch?

Luisa Sánchez Rivas

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Giannina Braschi's Linguistic Nomadism

The purpose of this paper is to analyse Spanish-English code-switching as an identity marker as well as a tool to construct a female subjectivity in Giannina Braschi's novel *Yo-yo Boing!* (1998). It will also explore the author's choice to place herself linguistically and culturally in a permanent state of *in-betweenness*; her writing strategies serve as a declaration and an assertion of a hybrid identity, embracing this way the liminal condition not only of her work but of herself as subject.

Within the framework of Rosi Braidotti's "Nomadic Subject", we will discuss how the author intends to create a language that can represent her hybridity. Braschi is a truly linguistic nomad that feels the necessity to express herself culturally and artistically in more than one language, stating that the use of more than one language in creative writing is promoting new ways of reading literature more inclusive in the 21st century.