

[L] POSTGRADUATE SEMINAR
IN LIMINALITY STUDIES



PS[L]S 4

The Limen in Upheaval

Conference Programme

THE FOURTH POSTGRADUATE SEMINAR IN LIMINALITY STUDIES

April 28th and 29th, 2022

UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE MADRID,
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES,
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

Organizers:

Andrés Guilló
Jennifer Harding
Trevor Westmoreland

PS[L]S 4 Seminar Schedule

Keynote talks are scheduled for 45 minutes with 30 minutes for discussion, while postgraduate talks will each last 20 minutes, with 10 minutes for discussion.

Thursday, April 28th

9:45 – 10:00 – Seminar opening

10:00 - 11:00 – Group 1: Liminality and Dread

10:00 -	Greta Kaisen (Humboldt University of Berlin)
10:30	Gothic Upheaval – Liminality in Southern Gothic Comics
10:30 -	Manuela Neuwirth (University of Graz)
11:00	Liminality as Disability: Non-Linearity and Disease in <i>Memento</i> and <i>Arrival</i>

Break: 11:00 - 11:20

11:20 – 12:40 – Keynote Address

Sandor Klapcsik (Technical University of Liberec)

Liminality in Acculturation, Cultural Learning and Migrant Cinema

12:45 – 13:45 – Group 2: Cultural Upheaval and Adaptation

12:45 -	Evie Lewis (University of Leeds)
13:15	“My whole body is your colony”: searching for a site of expressivity in Xiaolu Guo’s <i>A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers</i>
13:15 -	Trevor Westmoreland (Universidad de Alcalá)
13:45	Planetary Upheaval: Deracination and Integration in Becky Chambers’ <i>Record of a Spaceborn Few</i>

Lunch: 13:45 – 15:45

16:00 - 17:00 – Group 3: Marginal Identities

16:00 -	Carla Abella Rodríguez (Universidad de Salamanca)
16:30	The (Un)Homely Poetics of Hurricane Katrina: Environmental Inhospitability in Patricia Smith’s <i>Blood Dazzler</i>
16:30 -	Cristina Martín Hernández (Universidad de Salamanca)
17:00	“Truer than true”: Memory, Imagination, and the Writing of the Self from a Border Perspective in Norma E. Cantú’s <i>Canícula</i>

17:00 - 17:10 – Closing remarks

Friday, April 29th

10:30 - 11:30 – Group 4: Upheaval and Capitalism

10:30 -	Natalia Botonaki (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid)
11:00	Times of anger: exploring the complexities of passionate mobilization and change
11:00 -	Helena Sánchez (Independent Scholar)
11:30	The Millennial Curse: The (Im)Possibility of Longing and Belonging

Break: 11:30 - 11:50

11:50 - 13:10 – Keynote Address

Jochen Achilles (University of Würzburg)

Liminal Structures in Cultural Theories: Functions and Reflections

Lunch: 13:15 – 15:15

15:30 - 16:30 – Group 5: The Liminal and the Cyclical (virtual)

15:30 -	Lucía Bennett Ortega (Universidad de Granada)
16:00	Overcoming <i>Bewilderment</i> and Envisaging Normalcy: Richard Power's (2021) Cautionary Tale
16:00 -	Simon Pritchard (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)
16:30	Don DeLillo's <i>Mao II</i> and the Photograph as "Imagetext"

16:30 - 17:45 – Round Table

17:45 - 18:00 – Seminar closure

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Jochen Achilles

University of Würzburg

Liminal Structures in Cultural Theories: Functions and Reflections

Sandor Klapcsik

Technical University of Liberec

Liminality in Acculturation, Cultural Learning and Migrant Cinema

POSTGRADUATE SPEAKERS

Carla Abella Rodríguez

Universidad de Salamanca

The (Un)Homely Poetics of Hurricane Katrina: Environmental Inhospitability in Patricia Smith's *Blood Dazzler*

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the Gulf Coast of the United States of America. This catastrophic event caused unprecedented devastation in the area of New Orleans, where untamed storm surges challenged the levees that protected the city. The resulting cataclysmic flooding was only one part of the environmental damage that the urban *locus* sustained. Fatalities, displacements, and structural damage dominated the devastated landscape amidst a controversial management of the disaster response towards this humanitarian crisis. In her unapologetic poetry collection *Blood Dazzler* (2008), Patricia Smith documents the trauma involved in a process of environmental change, from its very inception to the ongoing attempts of reconstruction. Her poems simultaneously memorialise and give a voice to the neglected experiences of the Black residents in the most vulnerable contexts. Through the lenses of Derridean hospitality and ecocriticism, this paper tries to anatomise the

ecological violence of a natural disaster and how it is reflected on the spatial arena. The Hurricane Katrina presents herself as destructive *hostis* that poses a threat to the domestic spaces of New Orleans, but also underscores the relationship between minority communities and environmental (in)justice. It is in the spatial arena where the tension between belonging and uprooting, the familiar and the foreign, surfaces. The difficulties to anchor unfixed identities and memories throw the collective into what Bjørn Thomassen calls “macro-liminality” (94), a temporary state of in-between-ness. The constant dynamics of (re)construction and mobility leave the deprived residents with little to no opportunities to find comfort and consolation.

Lucía Bennett Ortega

Universidad de Granada

Overcoming *Bewilderment* and Envisaging Normalcy: Richard Powers’s (2021) Cautionary Tale

Set in the present capitalogenic climate crisis, Richard Powers’ most recent novel, *Bewilderment* (2021), follows the story of Robin, a neurodivergent child with a great sensitivity towards the natural world. Robin is subjected to an experimental treatment of neurofeedback sessions in order to help with his Aspergers and his obsessive-compulsive disorder. In my paper I argue that Powers’ novel does not only raise mental health awareness by resisting the labelling and stock categorisation that frequently accompany notions of disability, it also suggests that a dehumanisation occurs in this process of change towards “normalcy”. What is more, Robin’s neurodivergence is not constructed as a literary device on which narrative prosthesis relies on (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000), but is instead presented as an experience of socio-political implications. In my analysis, I concentrate on the cautionary elements present in the novel which imply that scepticism is needed in order to approach both the narration of the novel itself, as well as the treatment that Robin is subjected to. Disability is thus prevented from the limitations of a positivist convention of normalcy (Michalko and Titchkosky, 2009). In addition, I delve into the sense of discouragement and impotence that dwindles all hope in the process of transition depicted in the novel. Very much in line with Johns Putra’s (2019) “sense of no ending”, *Bewilderment* concludes with an element of cyclicity, denying readers any sense of closure or optimism with regard to the vulnerabilities it depicts.

Natalia Botonaki

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

Times of anger: exploring the complexities of passionate mobilization and change

Mass mobilization – a term which describes large scale actions with political, social, economic, or identity-based demands taking place in physical and/or digital spaces – is always a moment of transition, perhaps even the best expression of the liminal in political life. One characteristic of mobilization is its passionate components, and notably, the anger manifested by participants which often escalates into acts ranging from vandalism to violence. Such acts often play a definitive role in how protests are narrativized by the press and by extension, on the type of results they may produce. This presentation looks at two radically different visions of anger as vehicle for change to bring into relief some of the complexities of upheaval and its relationship to construction and destruction. On the one hand, it will look at Martha Nussbaum’s notion of *transition anger*, a forward-looking emotion which maintains the passionate component of outrage, provoked by a perceived injustice, while being devoid of a “payback wish,” which temporally speaking would hold the subjects involved in stasis (2016). The actions resulting from this will be constructive and in dialogue with existing institutions. Agnes Callard (2020) juxtaposes this vision with her proposal of anger as a register of harm done which, rationally speaking, may never be overcome. Whereas Nussbaum suggest that acts of revenge are destructive, Callard’s vision tentatively – albeit cynically – proposes they create new modes of coexistence between the subjects who caused and experienced anger respectively. Considering the way anger, and the violence resulting from it, formed part of the media constructed discourse on the BLM protests in 2020 and the Chilean protests of 2019-2021, this presentation aims to foreground the role it plays in the transitional nature of protest and contribute to the interdisciplinary examination of the *limen* as a site of upheaval.

Greta Kaisen

Humboldt University of Berlin

Gothic Upheaval – Liminality in Southern Gothic Comics

Upheaval lies at the center of the Gothic because it informs its tendency to confront and disturb cultural narratives. In its playful treatment of taboo topics and of what a culture considers strange, the literary mode can fissure master narratives such as hegemonic whiteness (Foster 2). As a disruption or disturbance, upheaval is essential to the Gothic as a “critical paradigm, foregrounding liminal spaces between history, locality, and identity” (Van Elferen 5).

Interestingly, this critical quality often manifests itself in the Gothic moments of a text rather than in the genre as a whole: The Gothic *mode* is a transgeneric, transmedial phenomenon, and thus, in its depiction of liminality, independent of traditionally Gothic plot elements. In my paper, I am going to examine representations of liminally white characters such as ‘rednecks’ and ‘hillbillies’ in Southern Gothic comics like *Moonshine* (2019) by Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso and *Redneck* (2017) by Donny Cates and Lisandro Estherren. I argue that in these comics, Gothic upheaval happens at a formal and affective, and consequently, at a phenomenological level. Rather than solely appearing in narrative plot devices; it manifests itself in the reader’s interaction with the text; in their “ability to identify and reflect upon connections and echoes between panels, [which] creates a haunted page” (Round 62). It appears in the “moment between anticipation and apprehension” (Botting 2), the liminal moment of transitioning from fearful uncertainty to cruel realization, or in more abject horror elements, which are especially characteristic of the Southern Gothic. Consequently, Gothic representations of liminal white characters are informed by the formal level of the medium comic. By centering the liminal, the Gothic mode provides a criticism that has the potential to deconstruct whiteness as a norm.

Evie Lewis

University of Leeds

“My whole body is your colony”: searching for a site of expressivity in Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*

This paper examines the upheaval of Guo’s protagonist and narrator, Z, as she migrates from China to London. It focuses on the twinned processes of transition Z faces as she both learns English and experiences a sexual relationship for the first time. Previous critics have focused their attention almost exclusively on the linguistic matters of the novel, namely the narrative voice which is an unusual ‘learner’s English’ as we follow Z becoming increasingly proficient in the language. I argue however that missing from these scholarly interventions is sufficient focus on matters of the bodily. As Z experiences intense difficulty, frustration, and feelings of helplessness in learning the English language, she simultaneously faces a twinned assault against her body, both from her ‘lover’ and the stranger who sexually assaults her (both of whom remain unnamed in the text). This paper examines the attempts of Z, as a woman of colour who is also a migrant, in her multiple states of upheaval as she tries to move ‘beyond’ the constraints of language. It will explore the extent to which the body is posited in the novel

as a pre- or extra-discursive site and, adversely, the extent to which the materiality of the body is always molded and shaped by discourse. In doing so I will illustrate the intertwined nature of the violence perpetuated against both the body, and the violence inherent in the language of the erstwhile empire, as Z searches for a site of expressivity where she can be free from the control of others. Guo's novel illustrates Z's search to find a space for being that is not mediated and policed by violent structures of power. Ultimately, however, Z's yearning for this unmediated relationality remains unfounded, and repeatedly she is failed in finding a site of expressivity in which she can exist.

Cristina Martín Hernández

Universidad de Salamanca

“Truer than true”: Memory, Imagination, and the Writing of the Self from a Border Perspective in Norma E. Cantú's *Canícula*

Inscribed in the theoretical framework provided by Bhabha's third space and Anzaldúa's *frontera* as an open wound, this essay focuses on problematizing memory and life-writing. By means of different contrapositions that put the liminality of the subject in conflict, the essay discloses the wounded nature of the border consciousness. In so doing, the examination of the autobiographical tradition elicits the fault lines and gaps of Western models within self-representation, and in accordance with tropes of individuality, coherence, and linearity. Conversely, new autobiographies will work towards the dissolution of former ideas of self and life-writing as well as the integration of liminality and ambivalence in terms of the autobiographical subject and genre. This new site of enunciation will also require a relocation of the speaking voice to the ambivalent and unfixed space of the border, thus unfolding movement and *crossings* as the main routes for inscribing a narrative of the self as both disruptive and liberating. Under this light, Chicana/o contemporary authors propose a new way of conceiving self-representation by means of a revision of individual and collective memory and its imbrication with history. Thus, the interpolation of texts and family photographs will play a key role in dismantling hegemonic parameters of self-representation, and embracing a fragmentary, divergent, and fluid conceptualization of the self that resonates in turn with Anzaldúa's notion of *mestiza's* consciousness. Through an analysis of Norma Elia Cantú's autobiographical narrative *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), I will unfold the many layers of meaning as well as the endless interweaving of memory and imagination, text and image, English and Spanish, absence and presence. The journey of the

self is based on conflict, as a new paradigm or structure of defiance that renders the self as a transcendental subject.

Manuela Neuwirth

University of Graz

Liminality as Disability: Non-Linearity and Disease in *Memento* and *Arrival*

In his neo-noir classic *Memento* (2000), director Christopher Nolan takes the viewer on a tour-de-force of narrative techniques as he tells the story of Leonard (*Guy Pearce*), a man who suffers from an inability to retain new memories. Two intersecting storylines that respectively move forward and backward in time reveal the plot bit by bit to the audience who needs to put the puzzle pieces together in this liminal space of uncertainty. It is this peculiar narrative strategy that makes the viewer viscerally engage and relive the protagonist's agitation, as Kautonnen et al. argue: "*Memento* simulates what it feels like to be a person who has suffered damage to the hippocampus that has obliterated the formation of long-term memories." Thus, while portraying a fairly young man suffering from an unusual condition, *Memento* recreates the experience of living with dementia. The 2016 sf movie *Arrival* depicts a woman (*Amy Adams*) who, in a subplot, decides to have a child she knows beforehand will die young, presumably of cancer. In a narrative technique similar to *Memento*, *Arrival's* narration is marked by non-linearity, liminality, and fragmentation. In this, it achieves a similar effect of disorienting the audience, viscerally transferring an existential dread of illness and death. agitation and upheaval, of integration and destruction. Situated on the thresholds between past and present, life and death, these stories come to stand for the liminality of disease itself. Lochlann Jain, in her treatise *Malignant*, asserts that cancer obliterates boundaries by breaking down the distinction between past and future, making the patient live "outside of normal time" (29). As the cancer diagnosis implodes the timeline of a 'normal' life, eliminating all usual reference points such as age and generation, the non-linear, liminal narration of these movies requires that the protagonists find a way of integrating this agitating non-linearity into their lives, or else be destroyed by it. In my paper, I will argue that the narrative choices in the depictions of the protagonists in *Arrival* and *Memento* not only viscerally engage and have the viewer relive the liminal experience of illness, but that they equate temporal inconsistency with disability, making non-linearity an existential crisis.

Simon Pritchard

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and the Photograph as "Imagetext"

The period of history that immediately followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ending of the Cold War has since been characterized as a time of peace and prosperity, as a time which made Francis Fukuyama's claim that the "end of history" had been reached seem plausible, as a moment of calm before the next great clash of civilizations loomed a decade later. This picture of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when viewed at a low resolution, has an element of truth to it, but when we view a picture of the period in closer detail we see how partial, or even misleading, this first image actually is. In a very tangible sense, this was a time of great upheaval and conflict: despite some claims to the contrary, the First Gulf War took place between August 1990 and February 1991, while, the very next month, war broke out in Croatia, marking the beginning of a decade of ethnic conflict in the Balkans. This clearly was not a time marked by the cessation of religious and political hostilities. In *Mao II*, DeLillo offers a more complete picture of these times and connects the upheavals that were occurring historically to wider cultural shifts involving the perceived usurpation of linguistic forms of discourse by imagistic forms. DeLillo problematizes W. J. T. Mitchell's idea of the "pictorial turn", which sees the cultural history of the twentieth century as being characterized by a decline in language-based artforms like fiction and poetry alongside an invasion and occupation of the cultural landscape by visual media like painting, film, television, and so on. DeLillo shows this idea of cultural upheaval to be predicated on a very unliminal image-phobia and, through inclusion of several photographs as part of his text, puts forward a view of art that avoids the binary categorization of pictorial/non-pictorial, imagistic/linguistic art that this idea entails. Susan Sontag is very much an ally of DeLillo's in this respect and my talk will look at *Mao II* in relation to Sontag's writing, particularly on the transition that her thinking underwent between her seminal work, *On Photography* and her later publication, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Her work will be used to illuminate how DeLillo uses photographs in his text to argue that transitions in culture ought to be seen as cyclical shifts as opposed to clean ruptures and as processes which involve a complex fusion of integration and destruction.

Helena Sánchez

Independent Scholar

The Millennial Curse: The (Im)Possibility of Longing and Belonging

Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) revolves around a traditional love story between Marianne and Connell, who are socially ostracised and struggle with their aspirations to normalcy. Although the novel relies on a sitcom trope, Rooney thoroughly explores the effect of social norms on the character's shifting identities and relationship, and engages with the dynamics of longing and belonging under the threshold of capitalism. Rooney's novel is deeply rooted in the conventions of the nineteenth-century social problem novel. This paper, however, analyses it as an example of its most recent development, the young adult problem novel, which places a strong emphasis on how characters experience a deeply impossibility of being a person in the world due to the impositions exerted by the norm. However, the notion of "normal" is constantly shifting, subjectively definable with no stable reality. In a Platonic sense, "normal" becomes an illusion, an unattainable goal. Furthermore, the inconsistencies and glitches internal to prejudiced ideas of normality are also applied to capitalism, which is seen as counter to human nature, and, by extension, impossible to implement. The desire to achieve normalcy in different life stages (school and college), thus, is presented as a liminal process of personal upheaval that forces the protagonists to reconfigure their identities through processes of destruction and integration within social dynamics. It is in this context that love is presented as a powerful force to challenge, deconstruct and create an alternative to the normalcy established by the illusory "normal" standards set by capitalism. Through a critical eye on how human relationships evolve in an exploitative economy, Rooney expertly explores the power of love to transform societies as well as its democratic power to overcome social, economic and class disparities. *Normal People* has captured the millennial ethos and the country's imagination through an ordinary story that aims at reconfiguring the Irish national identity after the Celtic Tiger in post-crash Ireland.

Trevor Westmoreland

Universidad de Alcalá

Planetary Upheaval: The Centrality of the Liminal in Becky Chambers' *Record of a Spaceborn Few*

This paper is conceived as a continuation of the analysis of the way the up-and-coming SF writer Becky Chambers utilizes the power of the liminal in fiction to deconstruct boundaries on two different levels, both the subjective and the sociopolitical. Her *Wayfarers* series – which presents life in a future in which the human species has escaped a devastated Earth and found a "Galactic Commons" of other sentient species – consistently works to undermine dominant

(heteronormative) discourse, doing so, moreover, through a repeated recourse to the liminal. In this talk I will focus on her third novel, *Record of Spaceborn Few* (2018), in which the question of diaspora is foregrounded. The novel's premise is built upon several events of societal upheaval, the most prominent being the destruction of humanity's homeplace of Earth to the extent that a group of people set off into space without any real destination. This generations-long journey creates the necessity for adaptation to life in this supposedly liminal state of planetary in-between, but Chambers' interesting move is to explore what happens when some of the inhabitants of the "Exodan Fleet" of wandering ships choose to continue living there (permanently orbiting a star) even *after* they find the Galactic Commons and are able to live on any number of interspecies planets: in other words, the liminal state transitioning to a permanent one. The novel's storyline is further centered around two other violent events which shake the otherwise peaceful community of the Fleet, serving as a center around which to stage a nuanced examination of the difficult experience of deracination and diaspora in a way which emphasizes the role of the liminal in the fundamental human ability to adapt to new circumstances. Ultimately, I will attempt to show the way Chambers' work is a multi-faceted revindication of the importance of the liminal, especially with regards to the role its expression in literature plays in terms of representing cultural upheavals and transitions in the society from which it is born.