NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

by

Cristina Simona Marian Albin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Art

in

Art

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

April 2020

©COPYRIGHT

by

Cristina Simona Marian Albin

2020

All Rights Reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 1

2. APPROACHES TO LIMINALITY.....4

3. CROSSING “GEOGRAPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BORDERS” (Espin, 1997). LIMINALITY AT GLOBAL AND INDIVIDUAL LEVEL.....9

4. PERSONAL DESCRIPTION OF LIMINALITY 15

5. LIMINALITY AND ART PRAXIS 19

6. CONCLUSION.....36

REFERENCES CITED.....40

LIST OF IMAGES

IMAGE Page

1. *Nocturne for My Father* by Tanja Softić 21

2. Details from *Turning World* and *In Progress* paintings 23

3. *Turning World* and a viewer 24

4. Improvised gallery setting.....25

5. *Turning World*.....26

6. *From Here From There* 27

7. *Where Past And Future Are Gathered*.....28

8. *Yesterday Was A Better Day*.....29

9. *Circumstances*.....30

10. *In Progress*.....31

11. *Wanderlust*.....32

12. *Inventory*.....33

13. *Apparitions*.....34

14. *Vaguely Familiar*.....35

ABSTRACT

Traditional rites of passage are losing value today or are forced to take new forms, sometimes at a rapid pace. Inevitable events instantly and actively change our personal, societal and global life. *Neither Here Nor There* examines mental and physical liminal spaces. My aim is to define the concept, etymology and history of liminality, while exploring its relevance in our modern world. Included as part of this paper, images from my current body of work chronicle different transitional environments, both aesthetically and emotionally.

The original concept of liminality, as described by earlier theorists, no longer holds the same meaning. Transitory experiences become perpetual, some occurring at the same time, some repeating. A liminal space can sometimes metamorphose into a home. In this thesis I am addressing several questions of liminality: What are the attributes of liminality and how does it reshape our identity? How do we navigate unsettling unknowns when the ground under our feet seems to constantly shift?

During the writing of this paper, the novel virus COVID-19 hit the world, resulting in fear, stress, anxiety, chaos, and changes. However, the crisis also brought with it flexibility, creativity, collaboration, and resilience. New forms of ritual are being born every second.

INTRODUCTION

> We are in important ways the sum of the places we have walked. And because the terrain seems so contradictory - peaceful here and terrifying there - the farther we walk the less we are inclined to claim we know.[1]

Permanent Transitional Being is the expression that best describes my personal circumstances. Life has repeatedly pushed me into the edgy territory of vulnerability where belonging to one place, either home or homeland, was often replaced by living in constant movement, unpredictable spaces and states of unknown. Migrating alone at an early age from the countryside to a town of two million, losing my home to a fire, witnessing the violent Romanian Revolution, and living between two divergent political regimes, all contributed to the feeling of permanent transition. These experiences inform my response to the world around me.

I am now a permanent resident of the United States. Since moving here in 2013, I am always asked where I am from – sometimes on a daily basis. This makes me think about my identity: who am I? What does it mean to be a permanent resident of a new country? How do all these changes affect my presence in the world? I'm seen and yet I am unseen – I still feel like an outsider. I reside within two realities: in Romania, I am the person that used to live *there* but moved *here*, while in the U.S. I am the person that moved *here* but am actually from *there*.

---

[1] American Photographer Robert Adams, *Art Can Help*, published by Yale University Art Gallery, 2017.

A recent investigation into my transitional life experience brought me to examine psychological and physical liminal spaces. In Latin, the term *limen* means threshold. We often hear the word *subliminal*, described as "below a threshold" of our consciousness.[2] The term *liminality* is rarely used. However, the term *liminal* is used more frequently, described in two ways: "of, relating to, or situated at a sensory threshold: barely perceptible or capable of eliciting a response" and "of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition."[2]

I define liminality as a stage of active transformation that happens when one passes through decisive phases of life, a transitory experience formed naturally, by choice, or through unexpected events. It is inevitable. It can occur at an individual, societal, or eco-systemic level, and it is always accompanied by positive and negative effects.

This thesis chronicles different liminal environments, in order to determine how context and intermediate moments affect our identity and interaction with each other, which instruments of navigation we develop in order to pass through these possible junctures, and most importantly, the role liminality plays in our contemporary reality. My aim is to examine what relevance liminality has for our rapidly changing world and what insights the concept might provide.

I will start by investigating and analyzing different academic discourses, from the original concept of liminality initiated by ethnologist Arnold van Gennep, to anthropologist Victor Turner's theory, to the unique perspective of

---

[2] Merriam – Webster Dictionary, www.merriam-webster.com.

non-places by anthropologist Marc Augé. I will discuss liminality as it is experienced at different scales today, including global, community and individual levels. Secondly, I will address my first conscious encounters with traditional rites of passage events in Romania, and will follow that with my personal experience of liminality. I will present liminal circumstances in my own life and the lessons I've learned when living at the intersection between disparate political regimes, within different geographical and cultural spaces, and a shapeless present. Finally, I will touch on the idea of liminality which strongly fuels my artwork, as it is reflected in my studio art practice.

Dislocation is something that a lot of people face today. If we consider the forced migration of refugees due to conflict or climate crisis, immigration, globalization, climate change, and the power of technology that transports people within cyber worlds, the entire modern world seems to be in a perpetual liminal state. Today one may have a country of origin and a country they have adopted, hold two citizenships yet feel as if they do not belong to either. The space in between the two cultures becomes home. This new space, which I prefer to call "interzone"[3] may be familiar and offer the comfort one needs in order to carry on with life. Communities create certain rites/celebrations that ensure a sense of unity and stability. If in a continual state of liminality, what will individual and global identity look like in the future?

---

[3] According to Merriam – Webster Dictionary, interzone lies between, joins, or combines two or more other zones. www.merriam-webster.com.

APPROACHES TO LIMINALITY

The first person who put the concept of liminality to use was ethnologist Arnold van Gennep, who in 1909 wrote *The Rites of Passage*. Van Gennep describes liminality as the intermediary phase that occurs in small-scale societies in different rites of passage such as birth, puberty, marriage, death, after the separation phase and before the re-integration phase. In any major change that takes place at the individual or communal level, Van Gennep sees three stages: Separation as the state of detachment from the previous point; Transition as the liminal period; and Incorporation as the re-integrative, stable state. The *rites of passage* can be identified in any modification of age, situation, social status, time and place. This liminal experience is one of unknowing, ambiguity, waiting, transition, and transformation, and is often accompanied by different rituals that facilitate the transition. Van Gennep states:

> For groups, as well as individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: the threshold of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night, the threshold of birth, adolescence, maturity and old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife – for those who believe in it.[4]

It is significant that his definition of liminality expresses forward-moving temporality and change. According to Van Gennep, a person moves in a straight line from birth to death.

---

[4] Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, The University of Chicago Press, 1960.

More than fifty years later, cultural anthropologist Victor Turner broadened Van Gennep's theory by making a complex evaluation of the socio-cultural terrain seen in transition between two states. The person moving through this passage loses his/her initial societal status and gains an imprecise one, feels unseen and isolated. Inspired by anthropologist Mary Douglas' theory on purity and uncleanness, Turner builds a reverberating theory of liminality:

> from this standpoint, one would expect to find that transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or NEITHER HERE NOR THERE; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least 'betwixt and between' all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification. […]. In fact, in confirmation of Dr. Douglas's hypothesis, liminal personae nearly always and everywhere is regarded as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, 'inoculated' against them, though having themselves been initiated into the same state. Liminal populations have 'no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows'.[5]

By studying different societies and cultures, Mary Douglas explains how something that is viewed as unclear and contradictory, is also seen as unclean and contaminated. For example, for the Nyakyusa people in Africa, a pregnant woman liminal personae is dangerous. She can decrease the harvest, because her unborn child "is voracious and snatches. She must not speak to people who are reaping or brewing without first making a ritual gesture of goodwill to cancel the danger."[6]

---

[5] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbol: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1967

[6] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis Of The Concept Of Pollution And Taboo*, Routledge USA and London , 1995.

Douglas' concept can be seen from another perspective also: what in traditional societies is considered clean and pure, in our modern world, would feel dirty and unhealthy, or makes no sense. Dirtiness, that which pollutes, means disorder. Disorder destroys known pattern. A liminal personae, even though he/she might not be doing something wrong, is outside the pattern. To be cautious, society takes all kinds of measures to eliminate possible dangers. The concept of pollution "is a reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction."[5]

Liminality carries both negative and positive connotations. To explore further, Turner describes several positive aspects for the individual, such as self-reflection, growth, transformation and reformulation of one's identity in relation to the world. Liminality generates new patterns and creativity. I will discuss this aspect of liminality later in this paper, when sharing my personal experience of it. Living in between the familiar and a complete unknown can offer space for a new start of a new life. A bigger world is presented; new levels of openness and patience are achieved.

A contemporary approach to liminality and how it affects our world today is presented in the book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, by the French anthropologist Marc Augé. He brings a unique perspective on liminality by analyzing the physical and spatial aspects rather than purely temporal. For him, highways, motels, airports, train stations, shopping centers, migration camps, etc. are spaces created by Supermodernity, and he calls

them *non-places*. Augé suggests three main characteristics of Supermodernity: 1) Excess of time – the overabundance of events that generates difficulty in thinking about time, eliciting a need to give meaning to our world today; 2) Excess of space – a spatial overabundance expressed in changes of scale and exacerbated by the spectacular development of means of travel, as well as the (over)abundance of images – all of which function like decoys, generating migration, urban concentrations and multiplication of non-places; and 3) The ego – the individualization of references: "The individual production of meaning is thus more necessary than ever."[7]

The individual passing through *non-place* spaces

> has the simultaneous experience of a perpetual present and an encounter with the self. […] Frequentation of non-places today provides an experience – without real and historical precedent – of solitary individuality combined with non-human mediation (all it takes is a notice or a screen) between the individual and the public authority.[7]

These non-places are somewhat defined by the instructions for use. The individual interacts with texts or neutral audio voices that prescribe – "take right-hand lane", prohibit – "no smoking", or offer information –"You are now entering the Beaujolais region."[6] Similar with liminal spaces discussed by Van Gennep and Turner, in non-places human identity fades away and people become anonymous. There are moments such as an encounter in the airport, when one has to have proof of identity at the entrance and exit; in rest, while in that space, he or she experiences sameness and possible loneliness. This is not a place of

---

[7] Marc Augé *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, First published by Verso 1995 Reprinted 1997.

transformation as seen before (unless a bomb changes everything and sends one into a forced liminal state of being), but a simple, neutral transitory space that exists without having the organically organized structure of a community.

It is a common experience for someone with two citizenships to feel a sense of belonging to neither place; the space between the two becomes home. But even a neutral space can feel like home. Augé points out a paradox of non-place: a traveler lost in a new country, in a strange world with different language and habits, would feel at home in an airport or supermarket. For him or her, a multinational brand name and logo becomes "a reassuring landmark."[7]
Augé describes that when being in a new territory, one might start looking for human, geographical or cultural similarities to one's previous place of residence. This is a common experience of people throughout the world. If we apply his perspective to our lives today, no matter where in the world one might be, social media and successful global product brands offer familiar terrain. Places like shopping malls become rendezvous environments, common places of socialization, creating small communities.

CROSSING "GEOGRAPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BORDERS"[8]

LIMINALITY AT A GLOBAL AND INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

One's identity reflects the choices one makes, the things one does, and personal values. In the ongoing growth of personal development, to a certain level one can choose one's identity, and may have multiple ones. I am a daughter, friend, lover, partner, artist, art educator, and some of these roles can conflict with one another. However, our identity primarily reflects our background – familial, social, national values, etc. In both positive and negative aspects, we identify ourselves according to what we heard from parents, teachers and the people that played important roles in our lives.

In some societies, a person cannot choose an identity of one's own, so they choose to leave their country in order to pursue a truer self. Iranian born anthropologist Halleh Gorashi considers that our identities are in constant movement and modification, "dynamic, complex, and hybrid";

> Phrases like 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1992) or 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), are used by many scholars to emphasize the constructive nature of many cultural practices within the new context. […] Cultural hybridity is probably one of the most fashionable terms used within the social sciences to refer to people with mixed backgrounds (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1992; Werbner and Madood, 1997). It describes people celebrating multiple positions by making choices about living with and within cultural differences. In this way cultural hybridity

[8] Olivia M. Espin, *Latina Realities: Essays on Healing, Migration, and Sexuality*, Westview Press, 1997.

> represents a dynamic and plural notion of culture while essentialism is about a static and monolithic notion of culture.[9]

Considering our present time, a ramification of the concept of liminality needs to be made. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a United Nations agency created in 1950 as a response to WWII, today 70.8 million people around the world have been forced to leave home. In addition, citizenship for millions of stateless people have been denied, which means they have no access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, freedom of movement, etc. In 2019, "nearly one person is forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution."[10]

Statelessness, "the loss of citizenship or the loss of the right to have rights" as defined by philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is a global phenomenon that seems to continuously grow. Citizenship offers rights, a sort of protection, a certain level of security and sense of belonging, and a more stable individual and collective identity. In an interview taken by Barzoo Eliassi, Associate Professor at the Department of Social Work at Linnaeus University, Sweden, a 45 year old man from Kurdistan-Syria/UK shares:

> When you do not have your own state, you lose your history and culture. Others can make claim to your history and make it their own. For example, they deny you the right to claim a certain dance

---

[9] Halleh Ghorashi, *How Dual is Transitional Identity? A Debate on Dual Positioning of Diaspora Organizations*, Routledge, 2004

[10] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), https://www.unhcr.org/

> as Kurdish. You become like a stolen people. But if you have your own state, the state becomes like a library where you can preserve the belongings of your nation in it. In that library, you know what your identity is and what your rights are.[11]

Being stateless pushes one to live in the interzone. In the case of stateless people, this is an inferior, tragic, and unsafe place where the right to work, study, own a house, have health care, travel, vote, etc. are denied. However, in a world of hierarchical citizenship, even with a passport one's freedom can be restrained.[11] As a result of statelessness, large-scale refugee movements may follow, "and thereby place substantial burdens on countries of asylum."[10] This liminal position occurs not only for the refugee person, but also for the asylum country and its citizens. For integration, tremendous changes need to be made. Are the governments willing to go through that active transformation and function in a perpetual in-between state? If not, according to UNHCR, this has

> some important implications for both human security and the security of the states. Statelessness is a threat to peace and security because it is a manifestation of intolerance and prejudice, especially when it occurs as a result of mass denaturalization and with the intention of forcing people to abandon their home[10]

The topics of crossing one's homeland border and how this transitional experience reshapes personal psychology and identity are of interest to me. To all three anthropologists mentioned above, the concept of liminality was considered more from a social perspective and less from an individual one. How are individual psyches altered by liminal experiences? What personal strategies need

---

[11] Barzoo Eliassi, *Narratives of Statelessness And Political Belonging Among Kurdish Diasporas In Sweden And The UK*, Working Paper, May 2015.

to be developed, in order to assist in this transition? It seems to me that ritual or ceremony as described by Van Gennep and Turner might not be suitable in this case. How is a community rite of passage adapted for a global society?

Migrating to a new place offers the psychological, emotional and physical space for identity re-negotiation. When leaving geographical and social borders, the sense of home is lost. We define home as a unification of place, culture and people we value and care about. In lecturer in geography Elizabeth Kenworthy Theater's vision,

> Perhaps the most common concept of home is of a material, bounded place where our own activity spaces and those of people closest to us overlap. […] We, and they, often share collective memories that are strongly linked with specific places (Halbwachs, 1980).[12]

Losing that sense of home means losing one's identity in exchange for a new one. There is a complex process of adaptation to the new world: learning a new language; passing a long and substantial background/health check process; getting a permit to work and finding a workplace; redefining the notion of community and building a new one; learning new habits and ways of life, sometimes a total reversal of one's former culture; redefining former systems; learning laws and societal expectations; learning how to pass possible racial biases; renegotiate and internally accept loss (of family, friends, native culture, status, etc); work through contradictions, confusion, feeling of displacement,

---

[12] Elizabeth Kenworthy Theater, Embodied Geographies, Routledge, 1999.

loneliness and alienation due to the lack of support and losing the sense of home and belonging. The birth country becomes a place of memory that in time degrades and turns into an "imaginary homeland."[13] The memory of home is no longer faithful to reality.

Unlike Van Gennep's view, in the case of migration today, there are few traditional community rituals available to the immigrant. Often, one has to go through all this by him/herself, without the ritual and support from the new society. One is forced to invent his/her own rituals. Some processes of adaptation might last for as long as the person is transplanted into the new world, or may never take place. However, there are diaspora organizations that mediate between "the individual and the state, and play an essential role in the new forms of identity and sense of belonging."[9] In order to build and maintain good mental health and a healthy environment, it is important for an emigrant to develop connections and relationships with other emigrants from one's former country or elsewhere, but also with people from the host country. These organizations promote the recognition of migration, the importance of freedom, collaboration between communities, create links with governmental institutions and develop impactful programs for community integration.

Is this act of adapting to the new place a rite of passage similar to van Gennep's description of ritual when moving between societies? Director of Ritual Studies International Ronald R. Grimes writes:

---

[13] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homeland*, Penguin Books, 1992.

> Usually, rites can be named: Bar Mitzvah (the rite of becoming a man in Judaism), baptism (the rite of becoming a Christian in some denominations). […] The term 'rite' as used here refers to a set of actions, widely recognized by members of a culture. Rites are differentiated (compartmentalized, segregated) from ordinary behavior. Typically, they are classified as 'other' than ordinary experience and assigned a place discrete from such activities. A rite is often part of some larger whole, a ritual system or ritual tradition that includes other rites as well. […] Ritualizing is the act of cultivating or inventing rites. Ritualizing is not often socially supported. Rather, it happens on the margins, on the thresholds; therefore, it is alternately stigmatized and eulogized. […] 'Ritualization', then, refers to activity that is not culturally framed as ritual but which someone, often an observer, interprets as if it were potentially ritual. One might think of it as infra-, quasi-, or pre-ritualistic. […] Whereas the notion of ritualization invokes metaphor – one 'sees' such and such an activity 'as' ritual – rites of various types are 'there'. A cultural consensus recognizes them. Ritualization includes processes that fall below the threshold of social recognition as rites.[14]

The act of adaptation to a new community is quasi-ritualistic. If one doesn't benefit from a traditional ritual of integration, he or she has to invent one. The need for ritual assures some form of stability is still there. A daily quasi-ritual may be a hybrid between old habits and adopted ones. Having a more critical perspective, an outsider immigrant perceives some local practices as rituals, perhaps to the surprise of the members of the new community who might otherwise be opposed to the notion that their "secular" pursuits have the decided air of ritual about them.

---

[14] Ronald R. Grimes, Ritual criticism: case studies in its practice, essays on its theory, University of South Carolina Press, 1990.

PERSONAL DESCRIPTION OF LIMINALITY

The first example of liminality I recall, in what I now identify as a rite of passage ritual, was in my childhood when I learned about death. In Albestii de Arges, my small village in south-central Romania, life was filled with ritual on a daily basis. For example, one consideration was that in order for a person to rest in peace and attain a softer transition from life to after-life, his/her body had to go through a series of strict rituals. The entire community participates. First, the dead body goes through a washing and dressing ritual. After, in the unforgettable sound of the mourners, the body is kept at home for three days, as a time in which the family and neighbors visit, light candles, touch the body and whisper last words. Candles are permanently lit; the windows are kept wide open, where there is a jar with water and a piece of bread. That reflects the belief that upon death, the soul of the decedent wanders around to say goodbye, and needs to eat in order to have a smooth transition to the afterlife. Only after the burial does the soul leave. Sometimes for six weeks afterward, the soul might visit the house and family. Water and bread sit by the window for six weeks. Ceremonies are held for seven years. For example, for peace and cleansing of the dead person's sins, the family regularly donates food, clothes, and holds annual meal gatherings.

There are countless examples of inherited rituals that I grew up with and experienced, and they are still practiced today in rural Romania. Even the main religion of this country, Orthodox Christianity, has a strong association with liminality - life is considered a transitional moment from birth to the afterlife;

monks are liminal persons that live at the margins of the society; there are numerous periods of lent used as times of introspection, when one renounces certain behaviors and prays.

These examples can be considered “old fashioned” understanding of liminality, as they are similar to Van Gennep’s perspective. As I grew up, I was exposed to and entered a different kind of liminality. At age thirteen, I migrated from my countryside to Bucharest, at a time when Romania was in radical transformation from a totalitarian communist regime to democracy. Since then, and later after losing my home in Albestii de Arges to a fire, I’ve moved and lived in over thirty homes. I 2013 I became an immigrant to the United States.

My psychological experience of liminality is a tormented space in which I have lost my power and control. I float between two or more places, feel marginal and inferior, and try to find stable ground. I reside at the intersection between different societal structures, political regimes, cultural habits, languages, and different expectations. As described by Turner, this middle point is actually one of the margins, invisibility and isolation. Drifting from place to place has elicited heavy confusion, continual self assessment and re-negotiation of my identity, past and present. However, drifting has also had its advantages: it has offered me different points of view and has widened my understanding of life and the world we live in. It has offered me the feeling of infinite possibility, helping me sharpen my instincts and learn new skills. This is liminality’s stage of reflection, a

"fruitful darkness" as Victor Turner described it, in which creativity, flexibility and resilience are established and activated.

When we lose something we feel vulnerable. For balance and healing, we need a time of grief, a period of understanding, adjustment and learning of how to live without what we lost. Depending on events, this may be a time of shock, fear, confusion, hopelessness, anxiety, anger and even violence. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, American philosopher Judith Butler states:

> When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well.[15]

Since moving to the U.S., I've had to constantly re-negotiate my identity. For example, engaging in or practicing some Romanian superstitions, rituals, or habits make no sense here. I permanently see myself through this new cultural lens. Because of that, at times they seem funny and even foolish - don't sit at the corner of the table; don't put your purse on the floor; when someone asks what

---

[15] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, 2006.

you are doing, start enumerating all the things you did/planned to do for the day, and also include all the feelings you experienced that day; don't eat chicken on New Year's Eve, eat turkey; don't use your weird, Romanian expressions as people will give you a weird look, etc. I will never be able to completely lose my cultural background, and will likely never be able to fully internalize my new culture.

In a time with constant movement and change, I often feel more at home in a liminal zone rather than in a fixed one. Greatly fragmented, for me life has became the sum of fixed points and thresholds as I pass between them. The temporal characteristic of liminality as first described by van Gennep, for me is perpetual. Some liminal experiences may occur at the same time. For that, I associate liminality with Matryoshka doll sets. As Augé describes, I do experience a sort of "daily" liminality in supermarkets, train and airport stations, and places of our modern world – palpable spaces. Then there is liminality found at the intersection between reality and technology, which occurs in real time between the real and imaginary world, or between two worlds. There is also an interior liminality – personal transformative moments occurring when big changes happen in forced liminalities, or when moving to a new territory. As an artist, I experience liminality when passing the threshold between daily life and the studio.

LIMINALITY AND ART PRAXIS

Despite the fact that liminality is applicable to any art practice, very few art critics and academics make use of this term. An artist is constantly in a liminal state, in an attempt to question and communicate complex social realities, hidden aspects of life, imagined worlds, or personal experiences. An artist literally crosses the threshold between the quotidian world and the creative place of the studio. Art is also, it could be said, intrinsically liminal, in that the very perception of something as art requires an "as if" scenario that suggests an apart-ness to or separation from "regular" life. Indeed, what are galleries and museums if not non-places of liminal passage?

One example of an artist living life in transition is Tanja Softić. She has three citizenships, at one time was a stateless person, and her work articulates this liminality. Softić was born in Yugoslavia, then exiled to Bosnia and Herzegovina, once part of Yugoslavia, and later emigrated to the U.S. Highly responsive to each context she lived in, she uses media such as drawing, printmaking and photography. Softić investigates memory, place, migration, cultural identity and cultural belonging. In her *Migrant Universe* series of large size artworks, made between 2007 and 2012, Softić visually explores exile with its implications, memory, language, and the power of adaptation and transformation. *Nocturne for My Father*, part of this body of work, is a highly layered work made with acrylic, pigment and chalk on paper, and later mounted on a panel. Silhouettes of birds, shapes of flowers and cells, white lines reminiscent of some sort of map, are all

juxtaposed with plant-like shapes that appear as shadows. "It is a visual poem about identity and worldview of an immigrant," Softić says about her artworks, "Because I do not live and work within the comfort or boundaries of the culture in which I first learned to observe, interpret, and engage the world, I have the arguable privilege of having lived more than one life."[16]



Image 1. Tanja Softić, *Nocturne for My Father (Migrant Universe* series). Photo taken from Softić's website.

In my own experience of liminality based on the major life changes that happened in Romania without my choice, I wasn't processing those liminal events in my work. On the contrary, I didn't like my everyday reality and preferred to escape into imaginary worlds. I painted children's illustrations for many years, which expressed a fantasy realm that seemed to provide comfort. I even remember I used to say "I want to be in kindergarten!" Most of the images I painted looked very much like those I did in my childhood – smiley houses,

[16] Tanja Softić, *Circle Back: Immigrant Memories and Fungal Networks*, The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Penn State University Press, 2019.

sleepy suns, donkeys in the mood for travel. After my house burned down, all the objects associated with my past disappeared. I was left with only memories. A nostalgia for times and things that didn't exist anymore was strongly present in my work - longing for childhood, family, house, an entire life and our farm animals lost in the fire, for life as it was before. I used nostalgia as a counter-attack to the unknown and painful present. It was an antidote to extremely confusing times. Living with past memories grounded me and offered a much needed emotional equilibrium and hope for a good future. It offered a sense of continuity of the past, and probably prevented me from living in a state of anxiety. I lived in a liminal space between reality and fantasy. But after moving to the U.S., in order to survive, adapt, and somehow feel integrated, I developed an awareness of everything around me. I started translating my present into my work. The narrative elements were gradually replaced by ones inspired by reality. This place, its language and habits - everything here is so different - and I wanted to keep my eyes open and be fully present in this new world. The past was still breathing in me, but I put it aside for a while, just to avoid major confusion. I looked at all that was new, listened, processed, adopted, adapted, and integrated. When in need, I re-connected with my past, stable or unstable times. I have come to see my past with new eyes. I have reconsidered everything and know what to take with me further as my experiences overlap within me.

The result of this reflection on liminality can be seen in the *Neither Here Nor There* body of work, scheduled to be presented at the *Helen E. Copeland*

Gallery. Due to Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), the show was canceled. Prior to this development, I created an unstable, ambiguous atmosphere that mirrors and reminisces upon transitional experiences, now reflected in our current life situation. In my studio, the work is gradually composed of multiple elements and passes through different stages - a liminal journey before becoming one composite piece. When not operating with a clear plan, a script to follow, the making process itself is marked by disorientation – a frustrating but exciting and fertile phase before arriving at the final state. I use a de-collage technique, a tearing down action that can be related to the separation, isolation and negotiation that occurs in a period of transition.



Image 2. Details from *Turning World* and *In Progress* paintings.

There is no linear narrative and coherence in the work, but an intermingling of empty or chaotic surfaces with recognizable elements that emerge or submerge from these fields, and which convey a feeling of perpetual motion. Electric poles, industrial machinery, a building, a boat, a tree, or a fire, these could be landmarks, or elements that marked moments in my life. For the viewer, they are visual and/or narrative points of departure, or perhaps arrival. The work has an atmosphere very much akin to the liminal space. Sometimes, as in the *From Here From There* work, the focal point can be just a blob of paint in a loud color.

An exhibition itself of these paintings can be interpreted as a performative, ritualistic moment, a passage from a “normal” context to a “sacred” one. By experiencing the show step by step, the viewer would formulate what it is and what it is about, and ascribe meaning to the work.



Image 3. *Turning World*, mixed media on canvas. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 4. Due to COVID-19, this is an improvised gallery setting in a space that wasn't designed for this work. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.

In *Turning World* (20 ft x 5 ft mixed media on canvas) there is no geographical specificity. This is a space rather than a place, rendered by using a semi – abstract language. There is a blend of chaotic components with clear, defined surfaces of paint. This work is formed by five different 60” x 48” canvases. The boundary between each fragment is dissolved, similar with the immigrant’s experience; boundaries are replaced by new possibilities. The story is fluid, one moment merges into another. Due to the long horizontal format and the need of viewing the work step by step, the viewer is placed in motion.



Image 5. *Turning World*, mixed media on canvas, 20 ft x 5 ft. Due to COVID-19 and no access to a studio, this painting is not yet finished. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 6. *From Here From There*, mixed media on canvas, 60” x 48”. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 7. *Where Past And Future Are Gathered*, mixed media on canvas, 60” x 48”. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 8. *Yesterday Was A Better Day*, mixed media on canvas, 60” x 36”. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 9. *Circumstances*, mixed media on canvas, 60” x 36”. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 10. *In Progress*, mixed media on canvas, 60” x 48”. Due to COVID-19 and no access to a studio, this painting is not yet finished. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 11. *Wanderlust*, mixed media on canvas, 24” x 24”. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 12. *Inventory*, mixed media on canvas, 24” x 24”. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 13. *Apparitions*, mixed media on canvas, 24” x 24”. Photo Credit Angela Yonke Photography.



Image 14. *Vaguely Familiar*, mixed media on canvas, 24” x 24”. Photo Credit Cristina Marian.

CONCLUSION

My painting is a means of expressing the transitions and psychological liminal states of my experience. For climate or war refugees who have experienced trauma and forcibly find themselves in a new territory where their known way of life is turned upside down, and their native language is not understood, non-verbal self-expression is vital. How can one express thoughts, feelings, fears, or ideas without using a language understood by a therapist? Sharing deep wounds and emotionally charged events is difficult. Visual art, music, dance, and other creative activities can open up spaces for self-expression, reflection, grief and recovery, while bridging cultural and social gaps. These can be a new form of ritual. As Neda Nickzad wrote,

> It is important to remember Abraham Maslow's suggestion, that when people's basic needs for food, shelter, and safety are met, they show a strong drive toward self-expression, and even when their basic needs are not met, some people are still compelled to make art. Also, art therapist Bruce Moon has identified the existential purpose that art therapy serves by helping people to make sense of confusing, chaotic world, asserts that people can find relief from fear, anxiety, and stress, and can find new meaning in their lives through creating art (Moon, 2009).[17]

In this current global context, there is a need for acknowledgment, communication, and harmony. Art programs could create visual dialogues and strong links between refugees and host community members. I hope to be part of such a program.

---

[17] Neda Nickzad, *Using art therapy to help Muslim refugees assimilate and resettle in the United States* http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefer/waoe/nnickzad.pdf

As one who heavily understands the immigrant experience, artist Tanja Softic´ says:

> We should be listening, carefully, to the stories of migrants, exiles, and refugees, not only for the sake of exercising compassion but in order to learn ways of coping, how we are forced to rapidly evolve by witnessing the unthinkable: destruction of ancestral lands and homes, crops under water or burned by invading troops, home obliterated by bombardment, by tsunami, by lit torches in the hands of erstwhile friends and neighbors.[16]

Irreversibility, ritual, and temporality are strongly linked to Van Gennep and Turner's concepts of liminality. However, it looks like the connotations of their approach are changing today. Transitory experiences are perpetual; some can be repeated when one chooses to do so - as in the case of technology and cyberworlds, for example. The liminal space, interzone, becomes familiar, even home. This paper is finalized at a time when Novel Coronavirus (COVID – 19) sent an entire world into a state of liminality very quickly. In a span of days, our reality turned upside down. I see fear, confusion, loss, death, grief, adaptation for survival, attempts of re-stabilization on all levels, and creative solutions. I see communication between nations and miscommunication as well. Our daily lives and communal activities, no matter where one resides, are deeply altered. I simultaneously experience all the measures taken by authorities, institutions and individuals at two different levels – one through my family's experiences in Romania, the other through my personal experience here. The unknown is unsettling. We don't have examples of events like this in the past, at a global level, in order to know what to do. For now, this is an exercise of worldwide social isolation and quarantine. Thousands of

emigrants are returning to their former countries. Some are stuck in a place in between. For some small-scale business and individuals, the future is more uncertain than ever. Some social roles and occupations that normally tend to be marginalized, such as farmers, store operators, truck drivers and other precarious jobs are now most necessary for the literal functioning of society. The margins are moved to the center. A redefinition of the idea of the social worker needs to be made. For me, the emotional and conceptual resiliency built over my years of living in the unknown and in scarcity is a huge help in such radical times. I have my own struggles, anxieties and fears. This pandemic strongly hurt my professional practice, collaborations, social life, budget and much more that I cannot even see yet. Yet some recent publicized events such as empty shelves, rationed products in grocery stores, or the lack of toilet paper, were echoes of my past. Growing up in communism meant scarcity. Toilet paper in my village was non-existent until after the revolution. Everything from electricity, to hot water, to food was rationed. Learning to be resilient in a flux of permanent changes, to take things as they come one step at a time, and improvisation are vital at the moment. No one will be the same after this transitional experience. Will people be more afraid of foreign diseases and strangers?

In our modern world, with bigger scale events and rapid movement like this one, there is the possibility for new forms of ritual. Death rituals, as the one described from my childhood, are now changed. A prescribed ritual as in the past today might be a hurried and improvised one. Our greeting ritual – shaking hands, hugging or kissing as signs of trust, are now avoided; by some, it’s even seen as bringing death. Wearing masks, isolating ourselves socially, and using technology in order to connect are some of

them. Long-established church rituals are now forced to stop. All gatherings, no matter what their nature, are now online. New forms of connection and communication will develop, since we are social animals.

Immigrant or not, today we all live with an acute sense of uncertainty and disorientation, at both a personal and global level. For a better reaction to future major life changes, it is important to widen our understanding of current life and the world we live in, hone our instincts, learn new skills to navigate liminal states of being, and to learn from each other. I share Butler's perspective on interconnectivity and interdependence between human beings, including in vulnerable moments or conflicts. A good life would be one lived with others, even though "whoever I am will be transformed by my connection with others, since my dependency on another, and my dependability, are necessary in order to live and to live well."[18]

[18] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward A Performative Theory Of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, 2015

REFERENCES CITED

Barzoo Eliassi, *Narratives of Statelessness And Political Belonging Among Kurdish Diasporas In Sweden And The UK*, Working Paper, May 2015

Elizabeth Kenworthy Theater, *Embodied Geographies*, Routledge, 1999

Halleh Ghorashi, *How Dual is Transitional Identity? A Debate on Dual Positioning of Diaspora Organizations*, Routledge, 2004

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, 2006

Judith Butler, *Notes Toward A Performative Theory Of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, 2015

Marc Augé *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, First published by Verso 1995, Reprinted 1997

Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger, An Analysis Of The Concept Of Pollution And Taboo*, Routledge USA and London, 1995

Merriam – Webster Dictionary, www.merriam-webster.com

Neda Nickzad, *Using art therapy to help Muslim refugees assimilate and resettle in the United States.* http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefer/waoe/nnickzad.pdf

Olivia M. Espin, *Latina Realities: Essays on Healing, Migration, and Sexuality*, Westview Press, 1997

Robert Adams, *Art Can Help*, Yale University Art Gallery, 2017

Ronald R. Grimes, *Ritual criticism: case studies in its practice, essays on its theory*, University of South Carolina Press, 1990

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homeland*, Penguin Books, 1992

Tanja Softić, *Circle Back: Immigrant Memories and Fungal Networks*, The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Penn State University Press, 2019

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), https://www.unhcr.org/

Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, The University of Chicago Press, 1960

Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbol: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1967