

Introduction

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The original emergence of liminal studies took place in the halls of anthropology. The 1909 publication of Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage*¹ was the original big bang from which many ensuing manifestations came. No one person has advanced this exploration more than anthropologist Victor Turner. At the annual meeting of the American Ethnological Society in Pittsburgh, March 1964, Turner presented a paper which both built on and extended beyond the previous work of van Gennep.² His careful descriptions of structure and positions, geography, caste, emotional condition, social turmoil, and disaster expanded the scope and application of liminality. With the publication of Turner's well-known and cited work, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*,³ the doorway opened to a much broader multidisciplinary exploration of comparative liminality.

The most intentional effort at interdisciplinary study of liminality of its time was the Jerusalem Seminar on Comparative Liminality, which was held for many years at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under the direction of S.N. Eisenstadt and Victor Turner. These seminars of the 1980s pushed ever more directly into the ways that liminality manifests itself in contemporary culture, especially under the auspices of increasingly industrial, technological, urban, individualized, mobile, pluralistic, rapidly-moving societies. Of special interest were interior affective states which mirrored the external passages between different structures and domains.

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1. Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).
 2. Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111.
 3. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

Since that time many of the social sciences have borrowed liberally from the insights of liminality. Sociology, psychology, psychotherapies, education, history, literature, and religion have all related liminality to the driving themes, concerns, and questions of their own disciplines. A good example in the Jungian Chiron clinical series is the anthology *Liminality and Transitional Phenomena*.⁴ This collection features Jungian analysts who relate liminality to their already existing analytical themes as they reframe their practices with new liminal insights.

With the arrival of the 100th anniversary of van Gennep's *Rites of Passage*, the journal *International Political Anthropology* published a special edition dedicated to the issue of liminality.⁵ Out of that effort grew the anthology *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*,⁶ which contains expansions of the earlier journal articles as well as newly written chapters. Its focus is primarily on social, political, and international dimensions. The fact that the study of liminality remains relevant a century after the publication of van Gennep's seminal book is a testimony to its staying power.

The most recent anthology addressing liminal themes is *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place*.⁷ The genesis of the project was a 2014 conference at Trinity College, Dublin that resulted in a published anthology two years later. The guiding focus of the anthology is the description of the liminal domain which is found beyond the structure of place, abiding in the undefined reality of open space. In addition to expanding the discussion of spatial studies, this eclectic collection of essays explores liminality through the lens of literature, culture, sociology, and the arts.

In the world of theological studies, liminality has provided a new hermeneutic, a new interpretive key for analyzing and presenting texts, narratives, theological constructs, and the ways that that transformation takes place. From Biblical studies to liturgy to pastoral care to spiritual formation, the rites of passage and unique qualities of the liminal domain have risen to a place of new prominence among many academics and clergy. When revered emeritus professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary Sang Hyun Lee released his long-awaited theological summa in the winter of his life, it was entitled *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology*.⁸

4. Nathan Schwartz-Salant and Murray Stein, eds, *Liminality and Transitional Phenomena* (Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications, 1991).

5. *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009).

6. Agnes Horvath, Bjorn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, eds, *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015).

7. Dara Downey, Ian Kinane, and Elizabeth Parker, eds, *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016).

8. Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

For Lee, liminal categories provided an additional dimension that helped more completely express what was most important to him.

As important as the original contributions of anthropology in liminality have been for these many disciplines, it may be more accurate to say that they didn't simply borrow; they were awakened to what was already there. Human experience is full of passage and liminal dimension. From the *Odyssey* to *Hamlet*, classical literature has always depended on plot lines with deep liminal elements. The great religious traditions frequently include overarching narratives of passage, transition, and transformation. Personal experience often includes many liminal passages. These passages have always been there, and we now understand that more completely. Liminality is always characterized by crossing a definitive threshold and passing into and often through an undifferentiated yet potentially transforming time and space. To know this is to be aware of it when it happens, and having that awareness may bring help and guidance to others passing through parallel territory.

This anthology is the next project within the growing tradition of liminal studies. We have gathered many of the voices of liminality under one cover, those writers who work, teach, research, and live in close proximity to liminal thresholds and boundaries. Their curiosity and explorations provide the substance of a continuing conversation within the field of liminality.

In the following chapters, you will discover many facets of the liminal domain. Some of the authors focus on the interior passages of the spirit. Others are primarily preoccupied with the way social experience and transition shapes communities into what they are. The primary concern of some of our authors is the collision of cultures and communities and the negotiation of conflict. Many of our writers describe the ways in which liminal reality shapes, forms, and transforms human life through and with faith. Several chapters examine liminality as the result of disaster, war, and great social upheaval. The focus of some of our authors is the creative intersection between cultures and religious traditions. The intersection of religion and science creates its own kind of liminal space, one that often reinvigorates both of those worlds. And no anthology on liminality would be complete without universal elements such as mythical narrative, symbolism, the natural world, human sexuality, and mystical experience, aspects our authors do not neglect.

In the closing chapters of the Biblical book of Job, one of the great masterpieces of sacred literature devoted to the question of suffering, the impatient Job poses existential questions out of the confines of his liminal experience of loss. In his despair, he cross-examines God, demanding an explanation for his dire circumstances. Against a backdrop of deafening

silence, a voice spins out of the whirlwind: “Where were you when I created the foundations of the world?” At that, Job is struck silent. The only possible answer is that at the moment of creation, he was nowhere, he was nothing. The story ends that way, without a rational answer. No answer is the answer. Job asks for an explanation and he receives mystery instead.

This collection of the many voices of liminality represents, in one way or another, the questions and the answers circling inside that whirlwind.

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