On Liminality: Space, Time, and Identities

Imagine that you’re entering a cave on a sunny, warm summer day. There is a swift, and distinct, change in the temperature as you walk into the darkness – a cold, dampness that cuts through to the bone. The lack of internal light immediately plunges you into darkness as you journey further into the cave, and the inherent stillness and silence means any noise you make is amplified twofold. If the Underworld exists, this is likely where it would be situated. And yet, if you simply turn around to face the entrance of the cave, you are greeted by a completely different setting; you can see the bright sun, the clear blue skies. By walking back to the start, you can already feel the warm air, hear the natural noises that one associates with the outdoors. But stop right in the middle, between the entrance of the cave and its deeper chambers – here, you’re in between what can only be described as two completely different worlds.

This is a liminal space – and its where I exist, as a researcher and as a queer, mixed woman. I think I knew that I was queer quite early in my life – one of my first crushes on a girl was probably at some point in primary school, and my upbringing in theatre and dance circles introduced me to gay culture very early in my life. But despite this, I really struggled in a comfortable identifier for the way I felt; by the end of high school, I think I may have told one or two people that I was probably bisexual, but otherwise I kept to myself. It has only been recently that I felt confident enough to claim “queer” as an identity, but I also never really “came out of the closet”; it was more like a quiet shuffle into the world. The people who knew me knew, and that was always enough.

To be fair, personal identity has always been difficult for me to parse – although I’m mixed race, growing up in a predominately white town on Long Island, New York meant that I was always read as completely Asian, or at the very least, non-white. Most of my childhood and teenage years were spent trying to assimilate into the whiteness that surrounded me, and thus I forgo much of my cultural upbringing in exchange for acceptance. And yet, there was never true acceptance among my white peers – I continued to bear the brunt of racist jokes and harassment from others, regardless of how much white eyeliner I used to make my eyes appear “less Asian”. So perhaps it is ultimately unsurprising that this disconnect would become further entrenched into my psyche and disrupt my understanding of other aspects of my identity.

It wasn’t until I began my PhD research (Fitzpatrick 2020) that I began to understand and confront my multiple identity crises. My project was centred around the Covesea Caves situated on the coast of the Moray Firth in north-east Scotland. Archaeological excavations within these caves have revealed what has been interpreted as a later prehistoric mortuary complex, where intricate funerary rites were likely performed among and with the dead. This was further complicated by the presence of both human and animal remains, suggesting that ritual activity was also occurring, perhaps connected to the funerary practices of these later prehistoric peoples. As a trained zooarchaeologist, my role in this research was to examine the faunal remains from the Covesea Caves and decipher their relevance to human activities within the caves; this would be determined through a combined approach of focused taphonomic investigation as well as comparative analysis with the human remains from the same sites. The resulting interpretation revealed a complex narrative, in which the Covesea Caves were an importance space for ritual and funerary activities from as early as the Neolithic to as late as the Post-Medieval Period.

The Covesea Caves were considered to be liminal spaces, potentially as an area in between the living world and the world of the dead (Brück 1995, Brück 2006, p. 302). This was established using the definition by van Gennep (1960, p. 21), in which he describes liminality as a transitional state
between separation from one world, and incorporation into a new one. This definition was particularly useful with regards to the funerary character of the Covesea Caves, as rites for the dead were often used as a means of transforming the body from something “unclean” into something “purified” for transport into the underworld (Parker Pearson 1993, p. 204).

What made the Covesea Caves so unique, even among other liminal spaces, was how its liminality was not defined to just spatiality; they were also spaces of temporal liminality, in that the archaeological record revealed significant, intentional intermixing of material from different periods by human visitors (including modern day visitors, who often left behind items upon a makeshift “altar” in the Sculptor’s Cave). Even the overall characteristic of the caves can be considered liminal, in that it was somewhere between a place of ritual activity and the more mundane, domestic behaviours of later prehistoric life; this is something that has been noted by other archaeologists, particularly Richard Bradley (2005), as something which cannot be so neatly described as one or the other. Ritual practices were part of the domestic sphere during this time, and as such we find these liminal spaces in which both characteristics are present.

The intersections of liminal identities within the Covesea Caves resonated with me, as a person of similarly intersecting identities. As I continued my researched and developed my interpretation, I was able to see how difficult it was to place the sites into any particular classification – were they simply funerary sites? Or ritual sites? Further analysis of faunal bone from the Covesea Caves further complicated my initial assumptions – if use extended to the Post-Medieval Period, was this still a “later prehistoric” site? Given the evidence of bone modification and potential feasting activity, are the caves actually more domestic in character than originally assumed? What appeared to be contradictions were actually part of a complicated identity, one that reflects the realities and messiness inherent in life. And thus, I saw myself in these caves, and realised that I was also complicated and messy – and I embraced this. For me, this was embracing queerness as a form of liminality.

I should note that I’m not the first (nor will I be the last) to use liminality as a framework for identity, particularly in queer theory. In fact, liminality is arguably a vital component of queer theory; as March (2021, p. 455) describes it, liminality “brings together queer ways of thinking through unboundedness, spillage, fluidity, multiplicity, and processes of contingent, non-linear becoming, as well as the relations of power and regulation that seek their stability or closure”. Liminality has been used to situate discussions of sexualities (e.g., Whitney 2001), queer identities (e.g. Walsbergerová 2017), intercommunal marginalisation (e.g. Gorman-Murray 2013), and the intersections of queerness with other modalities (e.g. Punt 2008, Sinopoulos-Lloyd 2017). But above all, liminality is a form of resistance “to assimilation, essentialism, privacy, and heteronormativity” (LeMaster 2011).

Embracing the liminality of myself as allowed me to embrace queerness as my main identifier – sure, if you asked me to give it a proper name, I’d say that I’m most aligned with pansexuality. But being able to identify as queer, in all that the word entails, has been much more freeing. In living through queerness and the liminal spaces that encompass the rest of my life (and, in this case, research), I see boundless potential for further reconciliation with the past and growth for the future.

References


