Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.17938

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE
Liminal Spaces and the Vietnam War in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*

The only guide to a man is his conscience; the only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions. It is very imprudent to walk through life without this shield, because we are so often mocked by the failure of our hopes and the upsetting of your calculations; but with this shield, however the fates may play, we march always in the ranks of honor. (Berman vii)

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0402-0319

War has never been an easy theme for discussion. Perhaps for this reason Larry Berman decided to begin his monograph with the above-mentioned reflection by Winston Churchill (1940)—as an epigraph to his study on the Vietnam War and its consequences. It will serve as a springboard for the following paper and analysis of two literary works, which present apparently twofold perspectives on the Vietnam War, but—in fact—are equally informative sources of dismal reverberations regarding both Vietnamese and American interpretations of the war events. Thus, they construct an unequivocal image of the war, which has turned out to be detrimental for both parties. In this paper, I investigate the liminal state of both protagonists to illustrate that the Vietnam War has proved destructive to either participating side. The conceptualization of liminality allows for studying the transition of each individual in order to locate their potential points of convergence and mark in-between spaces which elude conventional frames of analysis. According to Viljoen and Van der Merwe, this might help to unravel the true potential of a literary text, since it reveals hidden planes of reference within the text itself:

> The relevance of the idea of liminality for literature is not only that many texts describe and represent liminal states, persons and transformations, but also that the space of the text itself is a symbolically demarcated liminal zone where transformations are allowed to happen—imaginary transformations that model and possibly bring into being new ways of thinking and being. (11)

Laura Zander supports this view, claiming that literature, "commonly understood as an artistic and creative discourse" (11), offers a broad space for exploration in terms of liminality. Especially literary fiction can be analytically dissected in a number of ways due to its complex and, at the same time, ambivalent nature. Thus, as the critic argues, "[t]he liminality of literary fiction […] is valued as an expression of its generative and creative potential. Illusion and deception are significant instruments literary fiction operates with as well as generates, to render literature a productive space of possibility and permanent transgression" (11).

The authors of both works provide apparently dissimilar portrayals of the war circumstances and its ramifications. However, after a closer look, accounts which emerge from their narratives seem equally sinister and overwhelming. The main character of the novel *The Sympathizer* (2016) presents himself as an "aide-de-camp and junior officer of intelligence" (Nguyen 3), whereas Tim O'Brien in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (2003) positions himself as both an author and a protagonist, thus constructing the narrative as a manifesto against war. O'Brien's experience as a foot soldier has allowed him to adopt a unique empirical perspective of a witness and a judge at the same time, which undoubtedly facilitates exploring the ambiguities of the war. Hence, a war account of a fictitious character clashes with a report of an American citizen, a Vietnam War veteran, but in no way is of lesser importance within the scope of representation.

Nguyen's protagonist reveals himself as an anonymous hybrid character: "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. […] I am simply able to see any issue from both sides" (1). As a half-Vietnamese and half-French communist double agent, he becomes involved in an undercover mission which leads him to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975. His mixed descent transpires to be a facilitator in his occupational environment, with a clearly-cut role: "I was one of them, a sympathizer with the Left, a revolutionary fighting for peace, equality, democracy, freedom, and independence, all the noble things my people had died for and I had hid for" (81). For that matter, O'Brien defines himself with reference to his military function: "I'd never been much of a fighter, I was afraid of bullies" (31). The author employs a non-linear and fragmented narrative structure, which enables him to move back and forth throughout time. After graduating from college in 1968, O'Brien receives his draft notice. He opposes the Vietnam War on ethical grounds but he also considers himself too beholden to his community to disillusion it by rejecting his duty. From the very

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

beginning, he perceives his role as an ill-conceived assignment: "I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war" (32). During basic training at Fort Lewis in Washington, O'Brien bonds with a fellow soldier, Erik, who also opposes the military. Their mutual disdain for the war stands in stark contrast to the views of their commanding officers, who—in a strongly nationalistic manner—define such a world view as cowardice and a form of mental disturbance. O'Brien's strong misalignment with his mission tosses him away into the abyss of non-reconciliation: "I was a confirmed liberal, not a pacifist; but I would have cast my ballot to end the Vietnam War immediately, I would have voted for Eugene McCarthy, hoping he would make peace. I was not soldier material, that was certain" (31). In fact, his opposition to war is clearly-stated and seeps through the whole narrative, which castigates its perpetrators and makes his witness testimony even more emphatic:

> I was persuaded then, and I remain persuaded now, that the war was wrong. And since it was wrong and since people were dying as a result of it, it was evil. Doubts, of course, hedged all this: I had neither the expertise nor the wisdom to synthesize answers; most of the facts were clouded, and there was no certainty as to the kind of government that would follow a North Vietnamese victory or, for that matter, an American victory, and the specifics of the conflict were hidden away—partly in men's minds, partly in the archives of government, and partly in buried, irretrievable history. The war, I thought, was wrongly conceived and poorly justified. (27)

This leads O'Brien to the decision of deserting the army and plotting an escape plan to Sweden, since this country does not extradite deserters back to the United States. However, with a ticket in his hand, he dissuades himself from this idea, as he is unwilling to face the ramifications of such flagrant disregard for his family and fellow recruits. After assignment to the general infantry, he joins Alpha Company in Central Vietnam and is sent to the frontline. Nevertheless, his reservations concerning the war do not wither towards the end of the memoir, but gain even a stronger force of persuasion, becoming his personal statement: "I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows, from one who's been there and come back, an old soldier looking back at a dying war" (32). This statement might prompt the reader to explore certain spaces of representation with a focus on the liminal state of the protagonist in his transitional period, which may reveal the "in-between" character of his transformation.

The concept of liminality, employed as a tool to illustrate the mental state of each protagonist, enables us to capture their "in-betweenness" and allows for investigating their inner passage. Such an approach opens more possibilities for interpretation, since there are interstitial spaces that need to be examined in order to define the characters' transition. According to Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture* 2), "these 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." Thus, the concept navigates us towards exploring "a difference 'within,' a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality" (13). What is more, Bhabha ("DissemiNation" 300) emphasizes another potential of liminality: it "provides a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal, and the emergent." This proves especially useful for investigations of narratives which elude conventional frames of analysis.

O'Brien positions his "in-betweenness" within the locus of a middle man in terms of acts defining courage as a military person. A boundary between bravery and cowardice seems to be a very fine line, since life circumstances frequently prove inadequate for one unambiguous resolution. Thus, as the author argues, courage and cowardice constantly interweave our lives in a common manner and we tend to act either way depending on a turn of events. This appears especially pronounceable in life-and-death situations, when life instinct clashes with reason. In O'Brien's view, perhaps that is why it is impossible to judge oneself according to only one point of reference:

> Or the other cliché: a coward dies a thousand deaths but a brave man only once. That seems wrong, too. Is a man once and for always a coward? Once and for always a hero?
>
> It is more likely that men act cowardly and, at other times, act with courage, each in different measure, each with varying consistency. The men who do well on the average, perhaps with one moment of glory, those men are brave.
>
> And those who are neither cowards nor heroes, those men sweating beads of pearly fear, failing and whimpering and trying again—the mass of men in Alpha Company—even they may be redeemable. The easy aphorisms hold no hope for the middle man, the man who wants to try but has already died more than once, squirming under the bullets, going through the act of death and coming through embarrassingly alive. (146–147)

Thus, the protagonist finds himself constantly torn between his duty, which requires a courageous response in any circumstances, and his fallible human nature, which at times does not enable him to act accordingly. O'Brien hopes that he can survive the torments of uneasy

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department
of Anglophone Literatures,
University of Białystok, Poland

feelings, but they crumple under the weight of fright and unexpected twists of events. His unexplored tensions between bravery and cowardice seem to position him approximately in the middle of Bhabha's binary scale, in the interstitial spaces, somewhere "in-between" these two notions.

In turn, the "in-betweenness" of Nguyen's protagonist evinces itself in displacement. Shoved between two realities of "them" and "us," also in terms of his hybrid identity, he emphasizes the significance of time over a spatial distance for an immigrant: "We were displaced persons, but it was time more than space that defined us. While the distance to return to our lost country was far but finite, the number of years it would take to close that distance was potentially infinite" (259). The aforementioned statement implies that refugees suspended in space and time are simultaneously immobilized by insecurity. What is more, the clash of time ("the present and the past") and space ("the here and the there") seems to position all the displaced in a vicious circle, with no way out:

> Saigon time was fourteen hours off, although if one judged time by this clock, it was we who were fourteen hours off. Refugee, exile, immigrant—whatever species of displaced human we were, we did not simply live in two cultures, as celebrants of the great American melting pot imagined. Displaced people also lived in two time zones, the here and the there, the present and the past, being as we were reluctant time travelers. But while science fiction imagined time travelers as moving forward or backward in time, this timepiece demonstrated a different chronology. The open secret of the clock, naked for all to see, was that we were only going in circles. (260)

This constant suspension thrusts them into a limbo from which there seems to be no exit. Similarly, positioned on a binary scale—this time between the "East" and the "West"—they fall into neither category, since their hybrid properties act as mutual deterrents, preventing them from swaying towards either direction. This resonates with Bhabha's theorization of liminal spaces, which seems to provide an apparently one-dimensional outcome of the transition, namely passing the "threshold." Although the concept itself "marks the place, line or border at which a passage can be made from one space to another" (Chakraborty 145), in certain circumstances a full transition is unfeasible, since the prevailing conditions preclude any autonomous change and, what follows, development. This lends space to a prolonged existence in the interstitial environment within which individuals can negotiate their social status. However, Arup Ratan Chakraborty points out that the aforementioned standstill acts to their disadvantage and argues

that passing the "threshold" is not always possible due to the fact that there are "situations in the lives of people in which transitions from an old situation to a new one, one social position to another, are hampered or cannot be completed successfully" (146). This has detrimental consequences, as any attempt to break this deadlock is futile and eventually stalls the final transformation. Hence, according to Chakraborty, such a predicament leaves a mark also on those in transition, since "[i]ndividuals who are caught in between two stages of development […] feel marginal, excluded, without identity or influence" (146).

The exploration of actual tensions between the notions of courage and cowardice (as well as the East and the West) according to Bhabha's concept of liminality constitutes a point of departure for the further conceptualization of liminality developed by British anthropologist Victor Turner. As it has been illustrated, Bhabha's tool is insufficient for a thorough investigation of this aspect. It provides a bipolar scale where courage and cowardice or the West and the East are at the opposite ends of the scale. Although they are both relevant and indispensable to explore "in-between" spaces, they do not allow for locating certain transitions and transformations of the protagonists within the interstitial spaces.

Turner's concept, which partially inscribes into this theorization, appears indispensable for discerning certain shifts, translocations and transfigurations of the subject in a process of change. The concept of liminality[1] was first introduced in 1909 in the field of anthropology by Arnold van Gennep in the context of social rituals in order to distinguish three phases characteristic of rites of passage: separation, margin or limen, and reaggregation.[2] The theory initially referred to the initiation rites of young tribe members. It was further conceptualized by Turner, who in 1967, coined the phases of separation, transition and incorporation and opened a scholarly debate to a wider range of social and cultural factors determining the formation of identity. The concept itself also derives from his work on ritual society, although it was developed with a view to be applied to modern society. The first stage of transition, separation, is marked by a certain time of physical detachment from the previous community, while the second stage, a liminal one, manifests itself as a midpoint in the transition from one social status to another. According to Turner (*The Ritual Process* 95), its attributes "are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition

1 Derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold.

2 First published in the work *Les rites de passage* (1909).

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space." The last stage in Turner's theory, incorporation, is characterized by a sense of return of the individual to a stable social state, after experiencing a transformation.

As the liminal state is of primary focus in this analysis, it needs to be conceptualized in more detail. According to Turner (*The Ritual Process* 167), liminality—as a state of threshold or transition in one's psychological and social reality—falls between the phases of separation and incorporation, in "a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action." This stage plays a vital role in the whole process of transition. Turner defines liminal individuals as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. […] Thus, liminality is frequently likened to […] being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness […], and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (95). Also, Viljoen and Van der Merwe point out that individuals who undergo a phase of transition are thrust into another spatio-temporal zone which appears indefinable and enshrouded in darkness:

> They cross the limen, in other words, into a new transitional state where the social fabric they are used to is allowed to unravel. They enter a different space and time that is so radically different from the ordinary that it cannot be expressed in ordinary language, but has to be described in metaphors or states of the in-between, like death, going underground or under water, going into eclipse. (11)

Although this liminal stage is destined for supersession, it should be perceived not only as a transitional phase but as a state in itself, since there are individuals or groups, for which this potentially temporary period turns into a permanent condition. Turner (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 261) emphasizes that there exists "a style of life that is permanently contained within liminality. […] Instead of the liminal being a passage, it seemed to be coming to be regarded as a state […]." Thus, if in certain circumstances the phase congeals into a fixed one, it may eventually become the final stage of transition. Pérez Firmat (confirms this view, stating that "Turner, in effect, supplements van Gennep's temporal, processual view of liminality with a spatial one. While for van Gennep the limen is always a threshold, it can also be a place of habitation" (xiv). Another significant variable pertains to the irreversibility of the process of transition once the liminal stage has been reached. In some cases, due to external circumstances, the phase of incorporation becomes unachievable, so in the words of Spariosu (38) "the liminal […] may not necessarily always lead

back to a center; on the contrary, it may, under certain conditions, lead away from it in a steady and irreversible fashion."

The motif of darkness in O'Brien's memoir manifests itself as an overt token of liminality. In *If I Die*, Darkness is inevitably conjoined with fear. Treading new ground in an enemy land breeds uncertainty and confusion, and a thought of detachment from the rest of the group seems to be bothering enough to nag the protagonist incessantly during a night mission: "One of the most persistent and appalling thoughts which lumbers through your mind as you walk through Vietnam at night is the fear of getting lost, of becoming detached from the others, of spending the night alone in that frightening and haunting countryside. It was dark" (92). Hence, darkness triggers fright, which envelops the protagonist and contributes to another interdependent variable: mental paralysis. Passing through landmines induces "self-defeating fear" that is especially hard to overcome. Diverse scenarios running through his head make O'Brien desperately cautious in order to avoid committing a fatal mistake:

> You hallucinate. You look ahead, a few paces and wonder what your legs will resemble if there is more to the earth in that spot than silicates and nitrogen. Will the pain be unbearable? Will you scream or fall silent? Will you be afraid to look at your own body, afraid of the sight of your own red flesh and white bone? You wonder if your friends will weep.
>
> It is not easy to fight this sort of self-defeating fear, but you try. You decide to be ultracareful—the hard-nosed, realistic approach. You try to second-guess the mine. Should you put your foot to that flat rock or the clump of weed to its rear? Paddy dike or water? You wish you were Tarzan, able to swing with the vines. You try to trace the footprints of the man to your front. You give it up when he curses you for following too closely; better one man dead than two.
>
> The moment-to-moment, step-by-step decision-making preys on your mind. The effect sometimes is paralysis. You are slow to rise from rest breaks. You walk like a wooden man, like a toy soldier out of Victor Herbert's *Babes in Toyland*. (126)

In light of Turner's theory, courage gains another vector of reference. It does not linger as an unreachable binary opposite but manifests itself as an indication of maturity. The state of fully-developed maturity harbingers the final stage of passage and thus makes the whole process of transition successful. This time courage also takes the foreground of O'Brien's narrative. Juxtaposed with fear, it is always a winner, if employed sensibly. Hence, acting wisely with perseverance and resilience will always turn out fruitful and give rise to bravery, which also enhances the chance for a successful transformation: "Courage is nothing to laugh at, not if it is proper courage and exercised by men who know

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

what they do is proper. Proper courage is wise courage. It's acting wisely, acting wisely when fear would have a man act otherwise. It is endurance of the soul in spite of fear—wisely" (137). The wisdom of action appears to support Turner's conceptualization and to lead the protagonist towards the third stage of the process—integration (evincing itself in stability), which can also be perceived as peace and the cessation of the war. This shifts our focus to another plane of reasoning, which invariably prompts the author to present further arguments against the war. His courage of conviction is strengthened by self-evident facts, which are so pronounced that they cannot be obscured even by "a cold-moon Vietnam night" (or, in Turner's wording, "an eclipse of the sun or moon") and entombed in the darkness of ignorance:

> There is the phrase: courage of conviction. Doubtless, I thought, conviction can be right or wrong. But I had reasons to oppose the war in Vietnam. The reason could be murmured like the Psalms on a cold-moon Vietnam night: kill and fight only for certain causes; certain causes somehow involve self-evident truths; Hitler's blitzkrieg, the attack on Pearl Harbor, these were somehow self-evident grounds for using force, just as bullyism will, in the end, call for force, but the war in Vietnam drifted in and out of human lives, taking them or sparing them or angering them like a headless, careless taxi hack, without evident cause, a war fought for uncertain reasons. (138–139)

The motif of courage echoes also in Nguyen's novel, inscribed in the slogan of the anticommunist refugee movement that the protagonist is entrusted to infiltrate: "Always resent, never relent. Perhaps that should be our motto" (181). In this case, in contrast to O'Brien's memoir, the final stage of the transformation process promises stability in the form of liberty. In the context of freedom, this gains an additional frame of reference. Those who want to win freedom need to be perseverant, as liberty always comes at a price and endurance seems to be an indispensable tool to achieve this goal. What is more, Nguyen's protagonist finds himself in a similar predicament concerning fright, which appears in alignment with Turner's reference to the womb, this time not only submerged in darkness but also imbued with fear. Being incinerated reveals oneself in incessantly dreadful images that threaten the character to come to fruition at any time. This might be viewed as a potential obstacle to reaching the final stage of transition. Nightmarish visions of being dismembered in the course of warfare actions generate a sequence of dark projections, which spill into his mind to reveal their ominous countenance:

> I feared nothing more than burning to death, nothing more than being pureed by a propeller, nothing more than being quartered by a Katyusha, which even

> sounded like the name of a demented Siberian scientist who had lost a few toes and a nose to frostbite. I had seen roasted remains before, in a desolate field outside of Hue, carbonized corpses fused into the metal of a downed Chinook, the fuel tanks having incinerated the three dozen occupants, their teeth exposed in a permanent, simian rictus; the flesh of their lips and faces burned off; the skin a finely charred obsidian, smooth and alien, all the hair converted to ash, no longer recognizable as my countrymen or as human beings. I did not want to die that way; I did not want to die in any way, least of all in a long-range bombardment from the artillery of my communist comrades, launched from the suburbs they had captured outside Saigon. (58)

Any countermeasures which might be employed in order to avoid this predicament seem non-existent. Thus, the suspension of his own somber thoughts in the darkness may be compared to a limbo that makes the protagonist exteriorize his fears.

Another question that needs to be posed with reference to liminality concerns a potential outcome of the characters' transformation: Do both protagonists reach the final stage of transition or are they suspended in an eternal limbo? This appears to be a complex issue, since both of them fluctuate between abnegation and self-reconciliation. O'Brien's constant perplexity about the justification of the war makes him linger in a state of suspension full of ambiguities and unresolved inner conflicts: "The war, I thought, was wrongly conceived and poorly justified. But perhaps I was mistaken, and who really knew, anyway?" (27). However, all the time his reflections lean towards the groundlessness of the war, a crusade with no merit: "It wasn't a matter of peace … but rather a matter of when and when not to join others in making war. And it wasn't a matter of listening to an ex-lieutenant colonel talk about serving in a right war, when the question was whether to serve in what seemed a wrong one" (30). The landscape of the war does not differ from any other war experiences and fear appears as an inherent derivative triggered by fighting against "enemy aliens": "Men are killed, dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are afraid and often brave, drill sergeants are boors" (32). Moreover, fright reveals itself as a factor which conditions certain decisions, this time in terms of manhood and cowardice, and what follows—fear of marginalization. This might also be perceived as a factor which keeps the protagonist suspended in a limbo of his own non-defiant acts, which seem to cocoon him in an apparent sense of security:

> Look into your own history. Here we are. Mama has been kissed good-bye, we've grabbed our rifles, we're ready for extinction. All this not because of conviction, not for ideology; rather, it's from fear of society's censure, just as Pound claims.

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department
of Anglophone Literatures,
University of Białystok, Poland

> Rather from fear of weakness, afraid that to avoid war is to avoid manhood. We come to Fort Lewis afraid to admit we are not Achilles, that we are not brave, not heroes. Here we are, thrust to the opposite and absurd antipode of what we think is good. (45)

The problem of marginalization is tightly interrelated with the concept of liminality. However, a strong line of demarcation needs to be drawn between the two conceptualizations, which—according to Sang Hyun Lee—define marginality. They should be inspected separately, since they constitute two separate components of marginality. The former term is defined as "the powerless and demoralizing space" into which the marginalized are thrown, whereas the latter one refers to "the positive, creative nature of the in-betweenness." As Lee explains:

> A person can enter into a liminal or in-between space without being marginalized, while marginalization (being pushed into the periphery) inevitably places a person in a liminal, peripheral, and in-between place. Liminality does not have to be marginality. But marginality includes a liminal aspect. (Lee 4–5)

Thus, O'Brien—expressing the fears of the drafted American soldiers—exposes their fear of marginalization, as well as being pushed to peripheral spaces and fringes of society on account of their reservations concerning their participation in the war. This time, again, they perfectly fit into the common characteristic of liminal people, who "fall in the interstices of social structure, are on its margins, or occupy its lowest rungs" (*The Ritual Process* 125). In consequence, the creative potential of liminality is thwarted and distorted, which—according to O'Brien's reasoning—derives from the lack of spirit: "We were not all cowards. But we were not committed, not resigned, to having to win a war" (172). Once again, the motif of paralysis penetrates his reflections and makes him ready for another confession: although fright functions as a shield against danger, it also doubles as a token of cowardice and inaction. That is why, as O'Brien argues, it needs to be hidden in order to save one's face:

> fear is paralysis, but it is better to be afraid than to move out to die, all limbs functioning and heart thumping and charging and having your chest torn open for all the work; you have to pick the times not to be afraid, but when you are afraid you must hide it to save respect and reputation. (202)

This countermeasure appears especially difficult to employ in circumstances which defy control and do not apply to the norms of non-war reality. Nevertheless, as Turner (*The Ritual Process* 167) observes, this opens a wider space for scholarly debate: "if liminality is regarded

as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs." According to O'Brien, what needs to be taken into account is the unexpected. The conditions of warfare are always uncompromising and it is frequently impossible to be composed in an unstable environment. Waiting for a rapid sequence of events makes one freeze in anticipation of the unavoidable:

> We started to go down. The worst part of the Combat Assault, the thing you think about on the way down, is how perfectly exposed you are. Nowhere to hide your head. You are in a fragile machine. No foxholes, no rocks, no gullies. But the CA is the army's potent offensive tactic of the war, a cousin to Hitler's blitzkrieg. The words are "agile," "hostile," and "mobile." One moment the world is serene, and in another moment the war is there. It is like the cloudburst, like lightning, like the dropping of the bomb on a sleeping Hiroshima, like the Nazis' rush through Belgium and Poland and Czechoslovakia.
>
> You sit in your helicopter, watching the earth come spinning up at you. (114)

This moment of passivity makes him suspended in a mental lockdown, temporarily isolated from the hard-hitting reality, which reveals another characteristic of liminality. Turner implicates that one of the most pronounced tokens of the liminal state is isolation, as liminality "may imply solitude rather than society, the voluntary or involuntary withdrawal of an individual from a social-structural matrix. It may imply alienation from rather than more authentic participation in social existence" (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 52). O'Brien's short-term mental withdrawal before an attack enables him to collect all his mental resources in order to successfully perform his oncoming mission. His inertness might also be magnified by the seemingly fruitless outcome of the whole venture. American troops inch forward only to find themselves trapped or compelled to withdraw. On the whole, their endeavors are counterproductive and the futility of the war does not boost their morale:

> We walk through the mines, trying to catch the Viet Cong Forty-eighth Battalion like an inexperienced hunter after a hummingbird. But he finds us far more often than we do him. He is hidden among the mass of civilians or in tunnels or in jungles. So we walk to find him, stalking the mythical, phantomlike Forty-eighth Battalion from here to there to here to there. And each piece of ground left behind is his from the moment we are gone on our next hunt. It is not a war fought for territory, not for pieces of land that will be won and held. It is not a war fought to win the hearts of the Vietnamese nationals, not in the wake of contempt drawn on our faces and on theirs, not in the wake of a burning village, a trampled rice paddy, a battered detainee. (129–130)

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

In the case of Nguyen's novel, the discussion concerning the war also tilts towards the suppressed potential of liminality and wrongfulness of the war. War, the Commandant argues, seems to produce nothing but aridity and mutilation: "Compare that to how their American allies poisoned this place. No trees. Nothing grows. Unexploded mines and bombs killing and maiming innocents. This used to be beautiful countryside. Now it's just a wasteland" (410). Or, as Man/the commissar puts it, "They have tested their techniques, their weapons, and their ideas on our small country. We have been the subjects of that experiment they call, with a straight face, the Cold War. What a joke, given how hot the war has been for us!" (448). From a diachronic perspective, the Vietnamese (including the protagonist himself) seem to be in a transitional period "when the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet taken definite shape" (Myerhoff after Turner 117). Moreover, the chances are slim that their future will materialize in an auspicious manner. Their "neither here, nor there" manifests itself in an obscure vision of (non-)returned sovereignty with no clear-cut resolution. As one of the Vietnamese extras on *The Hamlet* set states, "Before the communists won, foreigners were victimizing and terrorizing and humiliating us. Now it's our own people victimizing and terrorizing and humiliating us" (199). Through his characters, Nguyen thus foregrounds the most excruciating consequence that emerges out of this conflict. The Vietnamese nation feels betrayed by both parties. According to the General, the leader of the exiled South Vietnamese, "The people cry out for freedom! The communists promise freedom and independence, but deliver only poverty and enslavement. They have betrayed the Vietnamese people, and revolutions don't betray the people" (287). As another anticommunist character, the admiral, argues, the American side forfeited their promises to the disadvantage of South Vietnam: "[T]he Americans had betrayed us before, and there was no hope of fighting again if I fled to them. The Americans were finished. Now that their white race had failed, they were leaving Asia to the yellow race" (381). As a result, the Vietnamese experience their "in-between-ness" living in a limbo from which they can neither reverse, nor advance, since they are permanently suspended. They exist in their liminal space without any opportunity to pass the threshold. Thus, they are beyond transition, and "the 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past" (*The Location of Culture* 1).

What becomes conspicuous instantaneously is the fact that the protagonists' conclusions about the Vietnam War are discernibly convergent. The war turned out to be detrimental for all parties—however, for different reasons. According to Nguyen, the consequences of trusting

Americans are disastrous for the Vietnamese. Having been promised "salvation from communism" (15), South Vietnam falls into a trap with no escape: "They started this war, and now that they're tired of it, they've sold us out," says the General. "But who is there to blame but ourselves? We were foolish enough to think they would keep their word" (15). A motif of gullibility recurs in Nguyen's novel with even greater force, with accusations being cast also in terms of the protagonist: "I'm a loser for believing in all the promises your America made to people like me. You came and said we were friends, but what we didn't know was that you could never trust us, much less respect us" (213). Thus, he realizes that he has never been treated by Americans on equal terms, as his country has been thrown into the war on their own conditions. Nguyen inches forward with his imputations of wrongdoing, aimed at the Americans: "For what reason had millions more died in our great war to unify our country and liberate ourselves, often through no choice of their own?" (490). The lingering question is followed by strikingly similar ones: "What do those who struggle against power do when they seize power? What does the revolutionary do when the revolution triumphs? Why do those who call for independence and freedom take away the independence and freedom of others?" (493–494). According to rites of passage, explicated by Turner, "the passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of statuslessness" (*The Ritual Process* 97). In this case, stripped of his right to freedom, Nguyen's protagonist seems to be suspended in a two-tier reality. This stagnation period transforms in a stage where everything appears to fade into the distance, every objective seems unattainable, any transition unachievable. Liberty is not in view and the aforementioned questions remain unanswered. Perhaps for this reason, in Nguyen's words, "[t]he unseen is almost always underlined with the unsaid" (192). Apparently, Nguyen's protagonist does not pass the threshold, but instead, is pushed even further towards the marginal periphery of liminality.

The predicament of O'Brien, and hence his chance of passing the threshold, is constantly aggravated by his act of defiance against the legitimacy of the war. The author aptly juxtaposes doubtful justifications concerning the American involvement in the Vietnamese "affairs": one evil can never be used in vindication of another one, as it will always bear rotten fruit. For this reason, no victory is worth rejoicing at the expense of "the children napalmed" and lost lives:

> [T]here is little evidence that South Vietnam under the communists will be a worse place than a South Vietnam ruled by a Diem or Khanh. I mean, there

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

is no persuasive evidence, at least not persuasive to me, that all the lives being lost, the children napalmed and everything—there's no good evidence that all this horror is worth preventing a change from Thieu to Ho Chi Minh. You see? I look for the bulk of evidence. I see evil in the history of Ho's rule of the north, I see evil, from Fall's books, in the history of the string of rulers we've helped in the South. Evil on both sides. But the third evil, the death and pain, must also be counted in. And I am not persuaded that intensifying the third evil should be done so as to mitigate one of the other evils. (65–66)

In the end, one aspect seems to be blatantly obvious—the American government has not reached its goal: "Patent absurdity. The troops are going home, and the war has not been won, even with a quarter of the United States Army fighting it" (129). Nevertheless, O'Brien in his final reckoning does not appear to be an indigent neophyte, "symbolically represented as a kind of tabula rasa, pure undetermined possibility" (Myerhoff 117). His clear-cut statement about the wrongfulness of the war makes his voice firm and more resonant in his premise, which prompts the author to a final resolution:

I spent some time thinking about the things I would do after Vietnam and after the first sergeants and rifles were out of my life. I made a long list. I would write about the army. Expose the brutality and injustice and the stupidity and arrogance of wars and men who fight in them. […] I would crusade against this war, and if, when I was released, I would find other wars, I would work to discover whether they were just and necessary, and if I found they were not, I would have another crusade. (97)

On his final parting with Vietnam in 1970, O'Brien flies back home and moves from suspension in a war limbo to the retrieved control of his life as a civilian. Thus, the locus of his existence simultaneously places him in the last phase of his transition. Although "[t]here is no joy in leaving" and "nothing to savour with your eyes or heart" (200), his catharsis from the fire and brimstone of war grants him respite and alleviation of all tensions: "When the plane leaves the ground, you join everyone in a ritualistic shout, emptying your lungs inside the happy cave of winners, trying to squeeze whatever drama you can out of leaving Vietnam" (200). His process of transformation comes to an end when he lands in the United States, takes off his uniform and resumes his previous life. His final transition can be best explained, again, by Turner (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 16), according to whom "yesterday's liminal becomes today's stabilized, today's peripheral becomes tomorrow's centered." O'Brien's regained composure facilitates his "new" stabilization and anchors him in a "new" reality. Hence, the protagonist's

journey draws to an end also in terms of his transition. Subsequent to this experience, he is able to continue his ordinary life, however with an altered balance point after lessons learned.

In respect of the Vietnam War, the final outcome of this military endeavor does not leave much space for praise. President Richard Nixon "replaced the term 'victorious peace' with winning an 'honorable peace' in Vietnam" (Berman 45), which—in fact—appears still far from the truth. Although "Vietnamization and negotiation were Nixon's twin pillars for achieving an honorable peace" (50), eventually none of these measures was deemed successful. In the face of such an outcome, both protagonists bear the consequences of their participation in the war. Nguyen's protagonist remains scarred for life and does not earn respect in recognition of his achievements. After getting into progressively hazardous situations, he finally finds himself in a Vietnamese re-education camp, where he is constrained to produce a written confession of everything he has done on his confidential mission. Thus, his period of transition is halted and he is thrown into a vicious circle of torture and accusations. With reference to Turner's theory, he is unable to pass the threshold and achieve a sense of stability as a result of incorporation and a final transition. Hence, he remains suspended in a stateless limbo without any prospects for change. For that matter, O'Brien succeeds in achieving a fruitful transformation, since he regains his status and stabilization, and eventually escapes the limbo of war atrocity, darkness and fright. The completed process of transformation facilitates his stage of incorporation and reuniting with American society. Each protagonist's experience positions him in a different locus of existence, which proves that liminal spaces constitute a fertile field for exploration within the transition paradigm.

Abstract: Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2016) and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (2003) present apparently twofold perspectives on the Vietnam War, but—in fact—they are equally informative sources of dismal reverberations regarding both Vietnamese and American interpretations of the war events. Thus, they construct an unequivocal image of the war, which has turned out to be detrimental for both parties. In this paper, I investigate the liminal state of both protagonists in order to illustrate that the Vietnam War has proved destructive to either participating side. The authors of both novels provide apparently dissimilar portrayals of the war circumstances and its ramifications. However, after a closer examination, accounts which emerge from their narratives seem equally sinister and overwhelming. The concept of liminality, employed as a tool to illustrate the mental state of each protagonist, enables us to capture their "in-betweenness" and allows for investigating their inner passage. Such an approach opens more possibilities for interpretation, since there are interstitial spaces that need to be examined in order to define the characters' transition. The conceptualization of a British anthropologist,

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department
of Anglophone Literatures,
University of Białystok, Poland

Victor Turner, which inscribes into this theorization, appears indispensable for discerning certain shifts, translocations and transfigurations of the subject in a process of change.

Keywords: Vietnam War, liminality, Victor Turner, in-betweenness, interstitial spaces, Homi Bhabha

Bio: Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska (PhD, Department of Anglophone Literatures, Faculty of Philology, University of Białystok, Poland) dedicates her research work to the relationship of literature and culture by exploring their textual intersections and mapping their locus within the matrix of the contemporary literary criticism. Her major fields of academic interest comprise ecocriticism, postcolonial and cultural studies with a focus on ethnicity and identity formation in the context of immigrant narratives. In her monograph, *Japanese-American Literature through the Prism of Acculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2023), she engages in discourse on acculturation and acculturation strategies adopted by Japanese immigrants and their Japanese-American offspring, who struggle with their hybrid ethnic identities and resulting tensions between their American and Japanese selves.

WORKS CITED

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

———. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi Bhabha. Routledge, 1991, pp. 291–322.

Berman, Larry. *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam*. Touchstone, 2002.

Chakraborty, Arup Ratan. "Liminality in Post-Colonial Theory: A Journey from Arnold van Gennep to Homi K. Bhabha." *Anudhyan: An International Journal of Social Sciences (AIJSS)*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 145–153.

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

Myerhoff, Barbara. "Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox." *Celebration. Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, edited by Victor Turner, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982, pp. 109–135.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer*. Corsair, 2016.

O'Brien, Tim. *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. Flamingo Seventies Classic, 2003 [1973].

Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Literature and Liminality: Festive Readings in the Hispanic Tradition*. Duke University Press, 1986.

Spariosu, Mihai I. *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality and the Study of Literature*. State University of New York Press, 1997.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing Company, 1977.

———. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Cornell University Press, 1974.

Viljoen, Hein, and Van der Merwe, C.N. "Introduction—A Poetics of Liminality and Hybridity." *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature*, edited by Hein Viljoen and C. N. Van der Merwe, Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 1–26.

Zander, Laura. "Pleasures of Liminality." *Law & Literature*, vol. 37, 2025, pp. 623–651.