

How to Disappear Completely

This room installation is an exploration of dissociation, gender dysphoria, and liminality, and the places where they intersect. The connections between all of these are personally relevant and important to me, and I believe they exist outside of myself and in other people's lives as well.

The installation includes tarlatan body casts, dim lighting, and an ambient sound piece to create an atmosphere of both strangeness and serenity. Through casting my body, I was able to create something that does not explicitly represent me, but implies that I was once there. The lighting and sound piece play the role of creating an artificial liminal space.

As a whole, this installation is about the relationship between dissociation and liminality, and how I perceive myself and my identity in relation to both. Making myself a subject of both my research and my art has allowed me to observe and analyze my own inner workings in a way I never have before. My hope is for this physical space I have created to feel like the mental space I currently find myself inhabiting.

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Learning to Inhabit Liminal Space and Trans Identity

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I had a friend for a few years who I would hang out with almost every weekend, and we'd always walk to the elementary school near her house. It was a pretty short walk and we had our routine; we would always go the same way around the same time of day. One weekend, we left a bit later than usual. I'm not sure why, maybe it was right after a time change, or we were watching a movie or something. We ended up walking after sunset but before the sky was completely dark. As far as I know, we still went the same way we always did, but something felt off. Maybe it was the fact that it was darker than what we were used to, or the lights from the town over that illuminated the clouds with an off-putting greyish-yellow color, or that it seemed quieter than normal. It was as though we had stepped into a different dimension; both of us almost simultaneously started feeling weird and disoriented. We were beyond familiar with the neighborhood by that point, but when I asked my friend if she knew where we were, she did not. We had no idea if we were on the right road, where we were at all, or what was going on. It was eerily quiet; no cars, nobody walking their dogs, we couldn't even hear crickets. There was a breeze that didn't really feel warm or cold. It felt like we spent forever in this limbo even though it couldn't have been more than five minutes. It felt icky and scary, but somehow it was almost serene at the same time. Once we reached the main road that the school was on, and a car passed, the spell broke and the feeling started to fade away. I still don't know whether or not we had actually gone down a different road, or what exactly produced the strange aura we found ourselves in.

A couple years prior, I had a somewhat similar but much less creepy experience with another friend. For context, there's a huge farmers market in my city every Thursday night that makes downtown a crowded nightmare, and my friend at the time and I would go every single week. On this particular Thursday, it had been raining most of the day but stopped by the evening, so we decided to go downtown anyway, regardless of the fact that the market had been canceled. It turned out that almost nobody else had the same idea as us, and to this day it's the quietest I have ever seen downtown; we probably saw twenty cars in three hours. We were able to walk down the middle of Main Street without having to worry. The empty streets combined with the post-rainstorm air and neon lights from stores created the most magical feeling I've ever experienced in downtown San Luis Obispo. It felt otherworldly, much like my experience walking to the school, but this time without the creepiness factor.

I have many more stories about similar experiences, everywhere from walking around my middle school late at night, to spending an hour waiting at a bus stop with nothing to do but watch the world happen around me. A laundromat that was empty except for me and a friend, a rest stop along the highway at 2am, driving in fog so thick I couldn't see the cars in front of or behind me, walking through a tunnel underneath a road after dark. Whether these moments are creepy and disorienting, or peaceful and mysterious, the factor they all have in common is the feeling that they're separate from the rest of the world, like they're on a different plane of existence and time flows differently. The world disappears around me and sometimes I go with it, dissolving into unreality, becoming more and more spectral the longer I stay. Even familiar places can feel unfamiliar late at night or early in the morning, really anytime I don't normally experience them. I cherish the rare times I'm awake and out of the house before sunrise or after curfew, and I get to watch the whole world wake up or fall asleep. Ever since I learned about these places and times I've been enamored by them, and whenever I find myself in one I almost feel a sense of satisfaction, like I've been told a secret.

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Liminality describes things that are transitory, thresholds at the beginning and end, passageways leading from one thing to the next. The word “liminal” is derived from the Latin word “limen,” which literally means “threshold” (Merriam-Webster). Liminal spaces aren’t supposed to stand alone, they exist to move us between other things, they don’t exist as independent entities, and because of this they can make us feel a bit strange. Sarah McLaen discusses why in her article, “Places Where Reality Feels Altered”. McLaen explains that we are not accustomed to being in these places for longer than necessary. Thinking about liminal spaces or experiencing them as if they were standalone places makes it difficult for our brains to contextualize them. A liminal space could be a stairwell, an entrance, a bus stop, or a waiting room. Being in liminal spaces can lead to feelings of unsettledness, confusion, disorientation, and even anxiety. This occurs because while the logical part of our brains know that these places are not dangerous or threatening in any way, another part of our brains are unable to process them and try to trigger our fight or flight response. The resulting conflict is what creates this uncanny feeling of reality being just a little bit skewed.

Liminal times of day, such as twilight (the time between sunset and nighttime, or nighttime and sunrise), and midnight (the time between two days), can have similar effects. This is why even familiar places, like our schools or our friends’ houses, tend to feel strange late at night, or any time of day we do not usually experience them. One thing that comes with nighttime is quietness, and being around places that are usually busy and loud when they are quiet can elicit the same feelings of liminality.

Liminality can refer to not only physical places, but also metaphysical stages of transformation that take place in all of our lives. Periods of liminality are all vital for the formation of identity, self-realization, and personal transformation and growth. It’s important for us to allow ourselves to spend time in liminal periods, but staying in them too long can be detrimental. In *Iron John*, Robert Bly writes “If a person enters no [liminal] space he or she remains soft clay; if one stays too long, the human being ends up as a cracked pot, overbaked and blackened.” If identity is never questioned, identity is never formed or discovered. If identity is in question for too long or is overthought, then the sense of identity becomes oversaturated and confusing. It’s like if you mix too much paint together and end up with greyish-brown, or you say a word too many times and it loses meaning. Just as physical liminal spaces can make us feel anxious and confused, so can mental ones if we stay in them for extended periods of time.

Laurie Burrows Grad discussed in her article “LIMINALITY: The Threshold Betwixt and Between” her experience with liminality while dealing with grief. She described being thrown into liminal space by the death of a loved one as being “a very long emotional time out.” While in this liminal space she had to rediscover parts of herself after being intertwined with another person for so long, and learned how to become a new person. This is the essence of mental liminal space. It breaks down old habits, beliefs, characteristics, and traits following significant events (like the death of a loved one, natural disaster, etc.) or during formative life periods (like teenage years), and creates new ones in their place.

I’m nearing the end of my adolescence and, as we all do, I’ve gone through rough patches in my life. Before I began doing research for this paper, I never understood what emotional liminal space is and why it’s important, nor have I been aware of it while I was in it. I’ve found myself in various liminal spaces, times, and periods for different reasons for the vast majority of the last five years of my life, but only now have I come to understand that. Being able to see these periods as ultimately positive transformative experiences, instead of fruitless episodes of depression and confusion has helped me make peace with them. I know that they are finite and

will eventually lead to growth and newness. The liminal space I find myself in at the moment is strange as what I foresee on the other side, what I'm trying to get to, is another liminal space. I'm trying to arrive at a place of more straightforwardly positive growth and change, but in order to get there I first have to make my way through a not-so-positive period.

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According to the Mayo Clinic, dissociation is a disconnection from reality and/or self, which usually arises involuntarily as a way for the brain to cope with trauma or distress, and can range anywhere from passing feelings of unreality to chronic dissociative disorders. Some common symptoms and effects include detachment from identity and emotions, feeling that the people and things around you are distorted or aren't real, and memory loss. Many people have episodes or moments of dissociation at some point in their life.

I'm going to talk specifically about depersonalization and *derealization*, since it's what I'm familiar with. Depersonalization is essentially the feeling that you aren't present in your body, or that you aren't real. It can cause you to feel like you're a robot, or running on autopilot, as if you aren't in control of or feel removed from your actions. Derealization is defined by the feeling that you are separate from or unfamiliar with your surroundings. Reality may look fake or two dimensional, and perception of time can be distorted. Depersonalization and derealization can be triggered by episodes of anxiety or depression, trauma, or stress.

Episodes of depersonalization make it seem like my body, voice, thoughts and actions aren't really mine, and that the people around me either don't exist or I don't exist to them. I feel like I'm running on autopilot; like my thoughts and internal monologue are somehow completely separate from what's going on around me. I usually realize it's happening if I feel myself starting to space out, or I actively try to focus on or process something and I can't. I could just be talking to someone and then start feeling like they're far away or I can't understand what they're saying, or I'll be saying something and my voice starts sounding like it's coming from far away or like it isn't my voice. Sometimes I'll look at my hands and they'll feel like they're floating or they're too far away. One of the worst experiences with depersonalization was being unable to recognize myself one morning. It was like my brain had been taken out and put in someone else's body and I was just finding out. I haven't had anything else like that happen again since, but still, sometimes if I look at myself too long I start feeling weird, as though I'm not actually in my body, but I still know that it's mine and it's the one I'm used to inhabiting.

As for derealization, it feels like the whole world drops into a different dimension, other people don't exist, and things aren't actually happening. I have trouble reacting to anything or anybody, both inwardly and outwardly, because it feels impossible to even process what's around me. Ironically, everything that happens seems to happen louder and brighter. These episodes are usually what make me lose sense of time and place; I can forget or feel like I'm somewhere other than where I am, or time can feel like it's moving a lot faster or slower. Even though I can physically look at something I can't really process that I'm seeing it, or I can touch something but can't really feel it. Sometimes it makes things look distorted, or smaller or bigger than they actually are, or really far away. On occasion, I've had episodes that have caused me to literally forget about things I've done or conversations I've had.

I remember starting to experience depersonalization and derealization in ninth grade. It was terrifying at first, I didn't know what was going on and I was genuinely afraid that I or the world had somehow disappeared. For a long time, I didn't know what I was experiencing. I had

read about dissociation before, but only in the context of more severe disorders, such as dissociative identity disorder or psychosis. All I knew was that sometimes nothing felt real and I didn't like it, and I would try everything I could think of to ground myself during these episodes. It took a long time to put a name to what I was experiencing, and even longer to process and accept it. Now that I know what dissociation is, I am able to understand why it happens and how to cope with it somewhat. Even though my understanding has increased, I still don't quite know how to deal with or feel grounded in the midst of dissociative episodes. Despite knowing that these episodes don't last forever, in the moment they feel indefinite, and, ironically, very real. By that, I mean the perception that I or other things don't exist seems factual, and I'm unable to convince myself otherwise.

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In many of my experiences, the feeling of being in physical liminal spaces and the feeling of dissociation are very similar. Looking in the mirror and not recognizing myself, and getting lost in a familiar neighborhood in my hometown are very similar experiences in my mind. The more I thought about it, the more commonalities I found between my experiences with dissociation and being in liminal space, and liminal space has become a metaphor to understand my dissociation and issues related to it. While researching both liminality and dissociation, themes like disconnection from reality, disorientation, anxiety, distortion of time and place, and otherworldliness began to stand out. I find it interesting that the effects metaphysical liminality have had on me mirror the effects of physical liminality, but it also makes sense. Liminality retains its core definition, relating to in-between spaces and ambiguity, no matter what you apply it to.

All of these ideas kept seeping into my thoughts while I was back home for Thanksgiving break. Being at home after having been gone for so long felt strange. Knowing that I was only going to be home for a short time felt even stranger. I felt as though I was in a mini liminal period, being at home in the middle of a semester away from home. For the year and a half leading up to coming to Oxbow, I felt completely sure that I would return home and be a different person. It was surprising that being home had caused me to instantly revert back to an old mindset. Being in certain places and around certain people elicited a feeling of losing touch with myself, or at least the self I've been trying to create and cultivate over the last few months. I knew I was only going to be home for a little over a week, so I didn't quite let myself settle in, and maybe after the semester ends and I have had closure with this chapter I'll be able to move forward and carry over this new self. For the duration of the week I was home, I couldn't seem to shake the feeling that all of the last few months had never happened. I felt dissociated from the memories I've made and experiences I've had, and only upon returning and getting back into the schedule does it feel real again. It was jarring to almost immediately slip back into the person I was a few months ago, and who I now feel is someone separate from me. Even simply being in a different environment and around different people than what I've gotten used to felt like a dream (and not necessarily in a good way).

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When I was in middle school I began to question my gender identity for the first time. I didn't know it at the time, but looking back I realize I was in the beginning stages of a liminal

period of my life. To paraphrase a friend of mine, I felt like my base had been pulled out from under my feet. This period gave way to deep introspection and allowed me to learn about myself and understand my gender identity on a deeper level. Realizing I did not identify with my assigned sex and coming to terms with being non-binary and trans led me directly into another liminal period. Right now, I am in the same place I've been since realizing I was trans: I know I very strongly do not identify with or feel connected to my body, but haven't begun to transition. I am at the threshold of a threshold. I know that transition will give way to another liminal period, and that my identity and the body I want to inhabit will be somewhat liminal in their own respects.

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The intersection of gender dysphoria and dissociative disorders, I've found, is rarely discussed, despite depersonalization being a common theme in many transgender people's life experiences (Jones). A study published in 2015 revealed that nearly 30% of people with gender dysphoria have also been diagnosed with a dissociative disorder (Colizzi, Costa, and Todarello), in comparison to about 2% of the general population (NAMI). As someone who has experienced both dissociation and gender dysphoria, I want to give my two cents on why I believe they are connected. Depersonalization/derealization can be triggered by periods of anxiety or depression, both of which are common symptoms of gender dysphoria, and in general dissociative disorders develop as a way for the brain to cope with distress. If somebody is distressed by simply being in their body, the quickest, easiest way out is for the brain to disconnect itself from the body.

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While exploring liminality and dissociation, and the relationship between them, I found them both to be strongly connected to aspects of my identity, specifically the liminality that I see as an almost inherent part of being trans. Binary trans people who transition may experience a temporary liminal period during said transition, wherein they're "othered" by society. In general those who are genderqueer and non-binary (neither exclusively male nor female) may fall in a liminal space that lies between the binary genders that exist in western culture. I have found that my trans identity and occupation of liminal space are inseparable from one another. I entered a liminal space when I realized that I have gender dysphoria, and I'm still in a place where I'm not able to connect with my body, but also not yet able to do anything about it. Being in a liminal space regarding my identity, and the expression of that identity for so long has led to having trouble feeling connected to reality and contributed to feelings of dissociation.

I want to learn how to exist within finite periods of liminality, as well as within the indefinite liminality of owning a non-binary trans identity, and be able to remain connected with reality. I want to learn how to wholly and comfortably inhabit and connect with my body. Having a physical body is what allows us to interact with the world, and the world to interact with us. Feelings of disconnect from my body makes it difficult to interact with the world, and leads to feelings of depersonalization and derealization. The world doesn't always know how to interact with those inhabiting liminal identities and bodies, and therefore cannot teach us how to inhabit them. I have yet to figure out all the ins and outs of connecting with the world and with myself.

I want to refer back to the week I was home for Thanksgiving. Strangely enough, the times I felt most grounded and connected were when I intentionally sought out physical liminal spaces for my research. Maybe when my environment mirrors my emotions I'm able to feel present in that environment, which is a somewhat similar notion to Carl Rogers' theory of congruence. Congruence refers to one's self image and ideal self-aligning and overlapping, and when a person achieves congruence they are able to self-actualize. This idea of congruence, or one's inside and outside matching up, is a fairly familiar sentiment for many trans people considering or undergoing transition. Incongruence occurs when there is a gap between the self-image and ideal self, and prevents the person from self-actualizing. Trans people experience an incongruence between their gender identity and the sex they were assigned, which is what causes gender dysphoria. Gender is an important part of our innate identities, which is why dysphoria and incongruence affect people, myself included, so severely.

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Understanding the relationships between all of the things I've discussed allows me to understand aspects of myself and my identity on a deeper level. I have discovered liminal places within myself that I never knew existed. Inserting myself into my research has allowed me to observe and analyze my own inner workings in a way I never have before. Connecting multiple ideas of liminal space to my own identity and mental health has given me insight into how different aspects of myself and my identity are interconnected. I am learning to navigate through and between liminal spaces; I am learning to navigate my own identity.

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