

**Finding One's Place and One's Self:
The Liminality of Identity in *Almost, Maine***

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John Cariani's play about love and heartbreak, *Almost, Maine*, is much more than a poignant, efficacious comedy. Through an exploration of the liminal space, or the space between two distinct binary oppositions, each character's identity is unraveled by the influences of their romantic partners, which seemingly drive each character's self-concept to a different location on the line between distinct binaries. Liminality is revealed as not only a merging of binary oppositions but an explication by society which perpetually leaves individuals unsure of themselves. Therefore, by looking at the characters' attempts to form and reform their identities in relation to their present and former love interests, we can see that the characters of *Almost, Maine* and, by extension, the town they inhabit, are constantly in a state of becoming. Instead of supporting the idea "we are solely who we think we are," *Almost, Maine*'s characters reveal humans' true identities to be somewhere in between how we see ourselves and how others see us. I argue, then, the characters of *Almost, Maine* establish identity as a perpetually unsettled concept because one's relationship with others always provides the opportunity for change and provides commentary on how society constructs identity in inconstant particulars.

Interpretation

Unfortunately, many times this play is performed, actors and directors choose to make the characters campy—overacting runs amok, lines are delivered solely for comedic effect, and actors choose to portray characters as dense. A simple YouTube search for performances of the play reveal countless occasions of these theatrical choices, but reviewers are beginning to notice them as well. Tom Titus of *The Huntington Beach Independent*, who had his review published in *The Los Angeles Times*, states, "Cariani's characters act on impulse rather than logic, and the

play is filled with sudden declarations of love, followed by some impromptu kissing....[characters] veer more toward just plain silly” (Titus). This is a problem because Cariani’s playwright’s notes reveal his desire for the characters to be portrayed earnestly, with their pain “honored” in the performance (77). Furthermore, Cariani writes the inhabitants of *Almost, Maine*, “...are honest and true. They are not cynical. They are not sarcastic...But this does not mean that they’re dumb. They’re very smart. They just take time to wonder about things. They speak simply, honestly, truly, and from the heart” (7). Finally, to solidify the intended presentation of the play, Cariani dictates, “...’cute’ will kill this play...There is no need to sentimentalize the material. Just...let it be what it is—a play about real people who are really, truly, honestly dealing with the toughest thing there is to deal with in life: love” (7). Therefore, unlike other sources, the author’s intentions for the characters of *Almost, Maine* are clear, and it is important to analyze it with those aims in mind. Otherwise, if we attempt “to determine what form of his work [Cariani] meant to have...so as to establish it as the critically edited text [Cariani] wished the public to have, [the analysis] does not follow inevitably” (Gabler 108). So, while other critics of *Almost, Maine* attempt to read his intentions and end up changing the play, this paper will analyze the characters’ dialogue through the lens of Cariani’s notes in order to effectively interpret the characters.

Research Framework

In order to analyze these scenes and to understand the framework for my arguments regarding the characters’ searches for identity, it is important to discuss how liminality leads to distinct binary oppositions.

Victor Turner explained middle stages, or the state of being in-between two recognized states of existence, by coining them as liminal periods (Turner). The liminal is explained as

“something that occupies a position at, on, or in between both sides of a boundary. It is that uncanny place, space or experience that lies betwixt and between, neither here nor there” (Prins). By utilizing this explanation of liminality, I will argue throughout this essay the town of Almost, Maine is a liminal space. First of all, Almost, Maine is described as “...unorganized territory. Township Thirteen, Range Seven. It’s not gonna be on [a] map, cause it’s not an actual town, technically...See, to be a town, you gotta get organized. And [Almost, Maine] never got around to gettin’ organized, so...[it’s] just Almost” (Cariani 20). Liminality’s attributes are “necessarily ambiguous, since this condition [eludes]...the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner 359), much reminiscent of the town’s description. In labelling the unorganized territory as “almost” a town, Cariani establishes it as “detached from a prior condition of membership in the social structure, [undergoing] a transitional ordeal in which [its] structural attributes...are made ambiguous” (Gilead 183). Almost, Maine is undergoing the transition from not being organized enough to being considered a town; therefore, Almost, Maine fits the description for a liminal space.

If the liminal space, then, is the space in-between two seemingly different recognized states, it is vital to explore the positions on either side of the in-between: binary oppositions. Liminality reveals binary oppositions because the middle stages of becoming uncover what once was and what will be. In other words, gray cannot exist without both black and white. By extension, black and white must work together to produce gray (even though black and white are polar opposites). If the liminal space consists of shades of gray, we can look to either side of the binary to reach clearly defined states (black and white).

Furthermore, I assert Hegelian dialectics can be used to navigate these binary oppositions and bolster my argument that the characters of *Almost, Maine* operate in a state of liminality as

they are always becoming something/someone else on the paths of determining their identities. Hegelian dialectics utilizes the triadic structure for understanding arguments. That is, one side of the binary opposition acts as the argument's thesis, the other side of the binary provides the antithesis, and a synthesis of both arguments emerges as the "higher rational unity" (Spencer and Krauze). The higher rationality, then, exists within the liminal space. This is different from traditional logic in which a double negation reiterates the original thesis. Instead, the synthesis provides an area where the argument is continuously becoming something else. Because "liminality is embodied in transitional phases...the value derived...lies in a dialectical penumbra that is bounded by...converging forces" (Lew 2); the converging forces established by each binary opposition allows us to understand the characters' struggles of seemingly "always becoming" as they undergo their liminal periods.

Finally, there is evidence to suggest *Almost, Maine* and its inhabitants embody The Law of Attraction, or the idea that we possess "the ability to attract into our lives whatever we are focusing on" ("What is the Law of Attraction"). I argue the Law of Attraction merges binaries and, therefore, helps to create a sense of liminality. I have already discussed ways in which the town of Almost, Maine is operating in a liminal stage, trapped between the binaries of township and not township. Now, I also assert this is a direct effect of the characters' own confused senses of identity. According to the Law of Attraction, the areas we focus on are manifested in our lives. Therefore, as we will see the characters' are exhibiting confused emotional states in relation to their loss or lack of identities, I argue the town is manifesting these same qualities due to the Law of Attraction. This explains the phenomena that occurs with the northern lights as the play switches from scene to scene. Cariani notes the lights are a product of "atoms becoming excited" (6) by people "who are normally very grounded, but who have become very excited by

love...and other extraordinary circumstances” (6). Therefore, the town seems to feed off the energy coming from the characters as they figure out who they are, who they are not, and who they are almost. The northern lights, then, are most than just stage directions that shift the audience’s attention from one couple to the next. In fact, throughout theater productions, weather phenomena act as the “conventional stage language—or code—for the production of effects...that would establish or confirm a specifically supernatural context in the minds of the audience” (Thomson 11). Though I would not argue this play is supernatural, I do argue the northern lights—directly caused by the emotions of the characters—are designed to form a sort of spiritual effect in the audience, solidifying the presence of The Law of Attraction within this play.

Her Heart

The first scene in *Almost, Maine*, “Her Heart,” features a recently widowed hiker named Glory who decides to set up camp in another character’s yard to watch the northern lights. East, the character whose yard Glory pitches her tent in, is another example of how *Almost, Maine* and its inhabitants reflect each other. When East is introducing himself to Glory, he says, “I’m East. For Easton. It’s the name of the town...where I was born. Mess-up on the birth certificate...’a son, Easton, born on this sixth day of January...in the town of Matthew, Maine” (Cariani 19). East’s identity is so connected to Maine he even possesses its name. This could be why East is so hospitable with a stranger decides to camp in his yard to watch the northern lights. Glory explains to East she decided to come to his yard after reading a brochure about the people of Maine. She reads, “...people from Maine are different...they live life ‘the way life *should* be,’ and that, ‘in the tradition of their brethren in rural northern climes’...they’ll let people who are complete strangers...camp out in their yard, if they need to, for nothing” (Cariani 19). In the

spirit of living up to Maine's reputation, East agrees to let Glory camp in his yard, exemplifying his connection to Maine's cultural identity.

However, after her husband's passing, Glory is having to redefine her identity as she shifts from "wife" to "single woman." This struggle is depicted as Glory grapples with her newfound feelings for Easton. After Easton tells Glory he thinks he loves her, she answers with, "I'm here to pay my respects. To my *husband*" (Cariani 19). Instead of answering him with her new identity of a single woman, she reverts back to the identity she has lived with for years but no longer possesses, the identity of a wife. However, this is one area in which Glory expresses her liminality. On the binary between being someone's wife and not being someone's wife, Glory finds herself in the middle. The thesis is that Glory is no longer a wife because her husband is deceased, the antithesis is that she still is a wife because her husband died without filing for an official divorce, so the synthesis is that Glory is in the process leaving her old identity as wife behind and embracing a new one. This is clear as Glory and Easton's dialogue continues.

Glory explains she thinks "the northern lights are really torches that they recently departed carry with them so they can find their way to heaven," (Cariani 19), and says she needs to say goodbye to her recently deceased husband who "will be carrying one of the torches" (Cariani 19). Glory goes on to say, "I didn't leave things well with him, so I was just hoping I could come here and say goodbye to him" (Cariani 19). Glory, then, seems to be mourning her late husband since she both seeks to make peace with his passing and is hesitant to accept East's advances. Sigmund Freud says, "Profound mourning...contains...loss of interest in the outside world— [and] the...loss of...capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him)" (244). However, there is an obvious difference between mourning and

melancholia: mourning is a healthy response to a conscious loss and melancholia is an unhealthy response to an unconscious loss (Freud). Glory, in her state of becoming someone new, seems to possess traits of both mourning and melancholia. On one hand, she is hesitant to adopt a new love, a common response to mourning. However, Freud also mentions the state of melancholia includes, “a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (244). Glory’s delusional expectation of punishment is her belief that her role in his death bars her from having a future with someone new. So, her sense of responsibility for her husband’s death, then, contributes to her inability to move forward and claim her new identity. Glory tells East she “killed” her husband (Cariani 22). She goes on to explain her husband separated from her during their marriage which broke her heart, causing her to need surgery to replace her shattered heart with an artificial one (Cariani 21). After her surgery when her husband asked her to take him back, Glory said, “I have a new heart now...[and] it doesn’t want you back” (Cariani 22). Glory then explains to East that her confession killed her husband by causing him to get hit by “...an ambulance that was comin’ in from an emergency [that] didn’t see him and just...took him right out” (Cariani 22) because “if [she] had been able to take him back...he wouldn’t have torn outta there like that” (Cariani 22). In the logical sense, Glory did not kill her husband, but the antithesis to that argument suggests she did. By Glory’s logic, if she would have taken her husband back, he never would have been killed. Glory, then, is left to struggle in the synthesis, realizing she both did and did not kill her husband, jolting her into the long, complicated process of becoming a woman ready to love again. However, by the end of this scene, Glory seems to be well on her way to becoming her new identity as she waves goodbye to her husband as the northern lights wash over the set and she says “hello” (Cariani 23) to East as the music fades in

to close the scene. Though the audience never gets to see her fully transition into the new identity she builds for herself in relation to her affiliation with East, we do see her left in the process of transitioning into that new person, whoever she might be.

Getting it Back

The fourth scene in *Almost, Maine*, “Getting it Back,” tells the story of Gayle and Lendall, a couple who have been dating for 11 years. Especially with long-term couples, “It is proposed that satisfying, stable relationships reflect intimates' ability to see imperfect relationships in somewhat idealized ways-to make a leap of faith” (Murray and Holmes). This “leap of faith” seems to be what Gayle has been operating under over the course of her relationship with Lendall. Desperately wanting to get married, Gayle has been idealizing their relationship but realizes she cannot do it anymore. She says to Lendall, “I’ve tried to make you love me by giving you every bit of love I had, and now...I don’t have any love for *me* left, and that’s...that’s not good for a person” (Cariani 40). So, for 11 years, Gayle has been under the impression that people who have been together for a long time should get married. The antithesis to this argument is that people who have been together for a long time should not get married (which Gayle thinks is Lendall’s argument). So, in this scene, Gayle is grappling with her identity in relation her partnership with Lendall. They are not married, but people who have been together for a long time seemingly are set apart from those who are newly dating, and Gayle struggles with not being able to classify her relationship as long-term and looking towards the future or something else.

In order to delve into emotions, which, by nature are very anti-essential, Cariani chooses to make abstract concepts concrete in order to give them essential meanings. Love and pain, for example, are emotions many people feel. Furthermore, they are emotions people seem to be able

to identify. They can associate with love or pain with experiences they have had within their lives. However, everyone's experiences will be different. Therefore, everyone's definitions of love and pain are diverse, and there is a large chance they could be interpreted differently because language means different things to different people. The danger evoked from misinterpreting language has even been documented as Owen Ware notes, "We are somewhat defenseless against language, against its forces, because those forces are constitutive of the way we come to define our experience of the world and ourselves" (491). The language describing "love" is one of those forces. However, Cariani designates "love" to be something concrete and universal in this scene: something that can be both given and received in return. David Fischer writes, "Money is typically the currency exchanged between consumer and producer for goods and services. However... individuals have come to commodify their emotions for use as currency as well" (53), which is exactly what is described in the play. In the scene, all of the love the characters gave to one another over the years are represented by red bags filled with love—the currency. Gayle comes hauling in big, red bags of love explaining to Lendall, "I've brought all the love you gave me back to you. It's the right thing to do" (Cariani 38), followed by, "It's only fair for you to give me mine back because...I want it back" (Cariani 39). This exchange provides an essential definition to love by merging the binary between the literal and the figurative by presenting love as a commodity. Here, the figurative concept of love is represented by a literal commodity in red bags—a currency that can be both given, taken back, and traded.

Not only that, but Cariani goes on to exploit traditional physical representations of love as Gayle is distraught when she only receives a small red pouch back from Lendall, representative of all the love she supposedly gave him over the years. As Gayle pleads with Lendall, stating, "This is *not* the love I gave you...at least have the decency to give me back

what [I gave you],” (Cariani 41), she is silenced when she reaches into the little pouch and pulls out a ring. She is taken back, asking, “Is this a ring? A ring that you give to someone you’ve been with for quite a long time if you want to let them know that you’re ready for what comes next for people who have been together for quite a long time?” (Cariani 41). In that quote, Gayle’s revelation of society’s norms are evident. She could not have been happy in the liminal identity she perceived her relationship with Lendall to be (not quite married, but something more than dating). Perceiving this, Lendall invests in a ring, the traditional sign of commitment through an object. He tells Gayle:

You gave me so much [love] over the years that I didn’t know what to do with it all. I asked my dad if he had any suggestions, and he said, ‘You got a ring yet?...It’s time.’ So, there it is. All the love you gave to me. Just not in the same...form as when you gave it. (Cariani 42)

Because the ring is a symbol of a societal norm, it only makes sense Lendall would have to turn to an outsider for advice on what to do with Gayle’s love. Additionally, the outsider is also the one who has to dictate the fact it is “time” to move into marriage, proving how society has a huge influence on individual identities and sense of self. Gayle, however, is happy to accept this societal norm as affirmation of Lendall’s love, and we leave this pair in the state of becoming an engaged couple.

They Fell

Much like Cariani exposes cultural norms and how these norms develop a sense of liminality regarding marriage, the fifth scene of *Almost, Maine*, “They Fell,” exposes society’s reliance on heteronormative thinking. In this scene, two male best friends, Randy and Chad, discover their homosexual identities and fall in love with each other. Chad, all of the sudden,

falls down on the ground and staggers around thereafter. When Randy asks Chad what is wrong, Chad replies, “I just...fell in love with you there, Randy” (Cariani 48). Randy replies with:

You’re my best friend. That’s a thing you don’t mess with. And you messed with it. And you don’t *do* that...you’re about the only thing that feels really good and makes sense in this world to me, too, and then you go and foul it up, by doin’ *this*...we’re friends, and there’s a line when you’re friends that you can’t cross.
(Cariani 48).

Because of how prevalent heteronormativity is, Randy does not even realize his own identity as a homosexual in relation to his affiliation with Chad. Randy’s admittance that Chad is “the only thing that feels really good and makes sense in the world” (Cariani 48), is masked with his insistence that people do not cross those lines. Further examination of Randy’s phrasing, however, lets the audience know that Randy, as an individual, is not against the crossing of this boundary. Rather, he speaks in generalities. Instead of saying “we don’t do that” or “you shouldn’t do that with me,” he simply uses the informal second person, seemingly addressing society. However, Randy is able to navigate his feelings throughout this scene through nonverbal cues. Shortly after Randy’s response, he “suddenly and completely falls down” (Cariani 48) as there is a “moment of realization” (Cariani 49). In his stage directions, Cariani goes on to note, “It’s scary and thrilling and unknown. It’s going to be wonderful. Just not quite yet” (49). This implies it will take Chad and Randy time to completely cross into their new identities and, by extension, new relationship with one another. Because individuals are still breaking out of heteronormative mindsets, (even Randy and Chad), they are both in the process of becoming when we leave them—becoming a couple and becoming affiliated with a new aspect of their identities aside from heteronormative cultural norms.

Story of Hope

It is said, “There are times in everyone’s life when hope comes to a complete stop. This mental apathy can last for only a few hours or as long as a lifetime” (Rodriguez-Hanley and Snyder 39). The seventh scene explores this apathy as it opens with a woman, Hope, knocking on the door of an old flame, Daniel. She is there to finally answer Daniel’s marriage proposal (because she took off years ago with replying and has realized since that he deserves an answer). However, the man who answers the door does not resemble Daniel in the slightest. Hope asks the man if he knows Daniel, describing him as a “Big guy, big tall guy. Played basketball, all-Eastern Maine, center. *Strong*” (Cariani 55). Hope goes on to say she needs to apologize to Daniel for “dashing his hopes” (Cariani 55), but the man tells her that she did not do that to Daniel. He says, “If you *dash* somebody’s hopes, well that’s...kind of a nice way to let ‘em down...but...You said nothin’....and that’s...killin’ hope the long, slow, painful way” (Cariani 57), reminiscent of the state of apathy that follows lost hope and can remain for the rest of one’s life. It is then revealed that the man behind the door is Daniel, but he has gotten “small” (Cariani 58) because he “lost a lotta hope [and] that’ll do a number on [someone]” (Cariani 58). First, it is important to note that the man behind the door *is* Daniel because he is, in fact, Daniel Harding (Hope’s old boyfriend). At the same time, though, he is *not* Daniel because he is not the same man Hope remembers; his identity has changed. Therefore, Daniel’s identity is in the liminal space.

Furthermore, in literally naming the female character “Hope,” Cariani shows how losing an important person can concretely change one’s identity. Rodriguez-Hanley and Snyder have already asserted the loss of the figurative representation of hope can change a person’s identity by catapulting them into a perpetual state of apathy, but Cariani illustrates how the loss of a

person can do the same thing. However, since one person cannot describe how it feels to be smaller than before on the inside (because language is non-essential), Cariani relies on *showing* the audience Daniel's physical change, representative of his emotional state. Emotionally, he *is* Daniel Harding, but he is not the same Daniel Harding he was before he lost Hope, the person, and hope, the idea. Therefore, the scene leaves Daniel becoming a whole person again and Hope becoming a woman independent of Daniel.

Sad and Glad

Through exploration of what it means to re-establish roles after a break-up, Cariani analyzes what it means to be "found" by someone new, contributing to a new understanding of one's own identity. One night at a local bar, a man named Jimmy bumps into his old lover, Sandrine, on the night of her bachelorette party. As individuals, "Contingencies of self-worth represent the domains in which success or failure leads to increases or decreases in self-esteem, respectively" (Crocker); in response, "People seek out situations and engage in activities that provide opportunities for them to achieve success and avoid failure" (Crocker). However, relationships, though they sometimes provide opportunities to achieve success, often run the risk of failing. In Jimmy's case, his relationship with Sandrine failed (and this failure is with which he bases his self-worth), so he bases his idea of success off of her new relationship with a man named Martin. Therefore, Jimmy begins to base his identity off of how different he is in comparison to Martin, and we are introduced to the idea that one never really "finds" themselves until they are found by another person.

The term "found," then, is a binary opposition to the term "lost." Jimmy says to Sandrine, "If you're lost out there in this big bad northern world, Martin's the guy you want...to find you...and he found you" (Cariani 26), implying that it took someone else to "find" Sandrine and

truly bring out her identity. This is apparent because when Jimmy learns Sandrine has intentions of getting married, he tells her, “Thought it wasn’t for you, you told me. Guess it just wasn’t for you with me” (Cariani 27). Though Sandrine may not have been “the marrying type” with Jimmy, her identity shifts as she enters into a new relationship. He then realizes that if Sandrine has been “found,” he must be lost. However, Jimmy is not totally lost to Sandrine. Rather, he only thinks he is because her perception of him has changed. In terms of Sandrine, Jimmy now exists in the liminal space. His presence is not completely lost on her, but he cannot “find” himself in her either.

Clinging to the “lost” identity he has perceives himself to possess, Jimmy realizes he could never have been the person to unlock the quality in Sandrine which allows her to become “the marrying kind.” Consequently, he reveals he got a tattoo which reads, “Villian” (meant to be *villain*, but unintentionally misspelled) in order to “[mark himself] a villain so girls would stay away. So [he would] never have to go through what [he] went through with [Sandrine] again” (Cariani 29). However, he soon learns the waitress who has been checking on him all night is named Villian. As this dawns on him, he tells the waitress he is “glad [she] found [him]” (Cariani 30), indicating he is now moving out of his liminal space towards the other side of the binary (being “found” again). This supports the hope Jimmy feels that he will develop a new sense of identity as he addresses the possibility of a relationship with Villian.

Conclusion

Through *Almost, Maine*’s representation of numerous binary oppositions, portrayal of figurative concepts through literal dialogue and staging, and the liminality of both the town and its residents, we can see that the characters “find themselves” within their romantic relationships. Reading the characters of *Almost, Maine* in this light proves identity is not just a self-concept.

Identity cannot be defined solely in terms of how humans view themselves, but it also cannot be solely defined in terms of how others perceive them. This exposes the notion, though somewhat difficult to face, that identity becomes both non-essential and malleable as relationships change, reflective of the characters in *Almost, Maine*. Even moreso, however, with cultural norms in place, it exposes how society influences an individual's self-concept as it encourages one to view themselves from different perspectives. So, even when one remains in a single relationship, he/she is still ultimately in the process of becoming when one begins to analyze oneself from each different perspective. If we, as readers, are able to analyze and identify the entire identity represented within each character in *Almost, Maine* (based on how they see themselves and how society sees them), perhaps we will be able to apply those concepts to ourselves and discover who we really are and how our relationships and ever-changing perspectives affect that.

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