

Queering Time: Temporal Disruptions and Nonlinear Identity in Modern English Fiction.

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Abstract:

This paper explores the potential of the modern English-language novel to challenge the linearity and the strict adherence to chronology in order to portray queer subjectivity and nonnormal identity. This study investigates five literary works varying in length over a span of almost 100 years of English fiction, specifically Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *The Night Watch* (2006) by Sarah Waters, *Trumpet* (1998) by Jackie Kay and *How to be Both* (2014) by Ali Smith. The novels use various nonlinear techniques: cyclical extension, braided dual-century narration, reverse chronology, polyphonic testimony and formal doubling, to challenge the developmental and reproductive logic of the normative accounts of gendered and sexual selfhood. The temporal disruption of these texts is not just a formal experiment but a representational strategy: nonlinear plotting is a way to tell queer identities in a way that is not linear, one that does not conform to coming-out and coming-of-age teleologies. The paper also introduces a comparative analysis, summarized in table and diagram, of the narrative achrony and the construction of queer identity. The implications for studying contemporary British and postcolonial Anglophone fiction are discussed, as are directions for future research in the field of queer temporality across media..

Keywords: queer temporality, nonlinear narrative, chrononormativity, English fiction, narratology, gender and sexuality studies...

INTRODUCTION

In the vast majority of realist novels, and in many modernist ones, time is conceived as a river, moving along in one direction, bringing characters from birth to death, from innocence to experience, from childhood to adulthood, from single state to conjugal and reproductive state. The developmental logic, or what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) calls "chrononormativity", not only structures plot, it also structures personhood, programming bodies to socially acceptable markers. But there's a strong current of English writing that says no. Non-linear approaches to storytelling reversal, repetition, braiding, polyphony, circular return have been adopted in stories that cross time and span centuries, in those set around queer subject matter, by writers such as Virginia Woolf (*Orlando*, 1928) and Ali Smith (*How to Be Both*, 2014). Queer identity in contemporary English fiction frequently comes in the form of nonlinearity, and this paper asks an apparently simple question: why? The idea put forward in this context is that temporal disruption is more than a decorative method. The assumptions of linear and teleological development of gender and sexuality are deeply rooted in dominant cultural discourse and texts that desire to represent sexualities and genders outside of or at odds with that discourse need to often violate linear form to be adequate to their subject. In other words, non-linearity is a formal correlate to queerness, a way of telling the story of lives that loop, repeat, arrive early, arrive late, or simply don't arrive.

This project takes part in two different, yet closely related, dialogues. In literary analysis, the technical term for the analysis of the ways in which narratives move away from chronological order is known as narratology; there is a very precise literary vocabulary for describing these and related departures, but this has been applied more or less rigorously, all of which are few and fleeting, to the politics of such maneuvers. In queer theory, by

contrast, the category of “time” has been a fundamental one of analysis, and while “queer time” is discussed sometimes as a cultural theory or lived experience, it rarely gets any kind of close scrutiny with regard to a particular literary form. In bringing the vocabulary of Genette’s technical apparatus into direct contact with the accounts of Freeman (2010), Halberstam (2005), Edelman (2004), and Muñoz (2009) of queer temporality, this paper hopes to demonstrate that the two vocabularies illuminate one another: narratology provides the precision to say exactly how a text has disrupted chronology, and queer theory provides the explanatory power to say why that disruption matters..

The use of a corpus spanning nearly a century is on purpose. Woolf’s *Orlando* is at the cusp of Anglo-American modernism, when the formal experimentation with narrative time stream of consciousness, multiple focalization, achronic montage was already in full swing, with sexuality being but one of several driving forces, although, as this paper will claim, Woolf’s specific use of non-linear narrative form is inextricable from her negotiation of gender and desire. Smith’s *How to Be Both*, by contrast, is a work that belongs to a more recent era of literary history in which “queer” has become a term in widespread circulation both as a critical and popular designation, as well as a form of experimentation in its own right as is formal experimentation with the use and sequence of the narrative (including reader-determined sequencing). The paper asks, not only how individual novels queer time, but whether the nonlinear relationship to the queer content has changed in this period as queer theory and queer visibility have evolved in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The paper is divided into five parts. First, it synthesises the theoretical literature on queer temporality and narrative time as the basis of the analysis. Secondly, it provides an explanation of the comparative methodology employed to select and analyse the five main texts. Third, it provides close readings of the temporal architecture in each novel, with the use of each novel’s device at the center of each reading. Fourth, it summarises these readings and provides a comparative discussion in the context of two summary tables and two explanatory figures. Lastly, it reflects on the larger issues of “queering time” in the research of contemporary English-language fiction.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Queer Temporality: Chrononormativity and Its Discontents

This paper draws on the theoretical work under the umbrella of “queer temporality studies” that has developed as a result of queer theory’s work with historiography, affect and embodiment in the 2000s. The main text of the field is Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010). Freeman introduces a term to discuss this: chrononormativity, the scheduling of individual bodies of humans to maximum productivity and to fit into rhythms that state and family accept as normal, which they impose on bodies. To this he offers erotohistoriography, a way of engaging with the past that is tactile, sensual, and out of order one that acknowledges that historical time is sensed, not simply recounted chronologically. In a *Queer Time and Place* (2005), Jack Halberstam goes further by claiming that queer subcultures produce other temporal logics, logics that denounce the markers of family time: longevity, inheritance, reproduction, in favor of what Halberstam calls “queer time.” Halberstam’s narrative echoes Kathryn Bond Stockton’s (2009) idea of “growing sideways” a reconception of queer childhood as a sideways growth process that does not always become a straight adult process.

Two additional roles situate the debate in the field between queerness and futurity. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Lee Edelman proposes that queerness should reject the child as the symbolic foundation of linear futurity and the social order this is what he calls “reproductive futurism.” Conversely, José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (2009) argues that queerness is not about “the future” but rather about “that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough,” an orientation towards a not-yet-here future that refuses both the heteronormative teleology and Edelman’s anti-relational foreclosure of futurity. Carolyn Dinshaw and her colleagues (2007) organized the roundtable they call “Queer Temporality: A rejection of the forward progress of time or a reorientation of it?,” to which Freeman, Halberstam, and Edelman all responded.

The concept of queer temporality continues in related work: Historiography and affect. Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Getting Medieval* (1999) builds a model of “touching across time” that allows for anachronistic, desire-filled connections between contemporary readers and earlier texts. In *Feeling Backward*, 2007, Heather Love presents a queer history that is concerned with a loss narrative, a shame narrative, and a backwardness narrative, instead of a narrative of progress. An *Archive of Feelings* (2003) by Ann Cvetkovich also reconsiders the return of trauma and its nonlinear returns as a part of queer public culture. Other theorists, Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), which provides a spatial vocabulary of orientation and disorientation; and Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), which provide the wider theoretical vocabulary of heteronormative and the closet, against which chrononormative scheduling operates. The field is further complicated by Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) which demonstrate how queer temporalities can be enlisted in nationalist and homonationalist agendas, a warning relevant to any celebratory account of nonlinear form as necessarily liberatory.

Narrative Time: Classical and Postclassical Narratology

Where queer theory provides the “what” of this paper's inquiry, narratology provides the “how”. The basic tools for analyzing the relationship between story (fabula) and discourse (sjuzhet) are still contained in the precise terms of Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980), such as analepsis (flashback), prolepsis (flashforward), anachrony, order, duration, and frequency, which describe how a narrative's telling deviates from the sequence of events it recounts. Alongside Genette's, Mieke Bal's work created the structuralist tool box that this paper utilizes to present an accurate account of reverse chronology and braided narration.

For Paul Ricoeur, the three-volume work *Time and Narrative* (1984), narrative is the most important way in which lived, phenomenological time is made intelligible; emplotment is what makes discordant, disordered experience intelligible. However, this paper turns the analysis of closure in *The Sense of an Ending* by Frank Kermode (1967), which explains how fictional “ending” can give meaning to the “middle” of a life or history, on its head: What is it like when queer fiction withholds and complicates that ending? In Mark Currie's *About Time* (2007), narratology is put directly to the test against the philosophy of time, with the focus on the way fiction can depict tensedness, prediction, and retrospect in a way that ordinary language cannot. Towards a “Natural” Narratology (1996) by Monika Fludernik and *Story Logic* (2002) by David Herman bring classical narratology into the domains of cognitive and postclassical narratology, where nonlinear and achronic narration is understood to be a reflection not of a normative base but of the situated, embodied logics of experience, and where nonlinearity is read as meaningful rather than merely stylistic.

Gender, Sexuality, and the Marriage Plot

A second line of research to which this paper belongs examines how the marriage plot contributed to the form of the English novel in history. Another line of research to which this paper belongs concerns the function of the marriage plot in the history of the English novel as a structuring element. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004) are writable books about gender that do not directly involve the concept of narrative temporality, but nevertheless in these works, she posits the idea of gender as a repeated, citational performance rather than as a set property or essence that can be revealed at one point in time. Instructing the narrative toward a teleological conclusion by means of courtship, set-back, and eventual fusion the formal structure of many of the English novelistic traditions can be seen as a formal analogue of chrononormativity: a narrative technology that organises social lived time towards marriage and reproduction, that schedules character development towards heterosexual fusion. Teresa de Lauretis' (1991) seminal essay on queer theory as a field further explains why texts that reject such a schedule so frequently reject linear form, too: de Lauretis speaks of a queer position which names “a critical position that does not fall into the natural and inevitable binary categories of heteronormative culture.”

Bringing the Two Fields Together

There are few studies that engage queer temporality theory and narratology at the level of close reading. This paper's role is to do so systematically with a set of texts that are defined as comparative texts, and to describe, in Genette's own technical terms, how each novel disrupts chronology; and to explain, using the frameworks developed by Freeman, Halberstam, Edelman, and Muñoz, why the disruption matters in the representation of queer identity. This is a synthesis that is not a modernist innovation, but rather can be extended backward from Smith's contemporary formal experimentation to Woolf's modernism, as Joseph Boone's account of the sexual politics of narrative form in *Libidinal Currents* (1998) argues that the experimentalism of early twentieth-century fiction is often as much about the negotiation of sexual nonconformity as it is about the formal innovations of the author. Halberstam's subsequent book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) is also relevant here: Novels that fail to resolve, or to resolve in an infinite deferral of the accomplishment of that resolution, often find value in the failure to do so, and Halberstam argues that the same applies to queer cultural production.

Lastly, it should be noted that this paper is not so much a resolution of a methodological tension as a serious engagement with it. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the ‘chronotope’, the indissoluble conjunction of temporal and spatial relations that determines the shape of a novel or genre is a wider theoretical justification for considering time and form as mutually constitutive, but Bakhtin did not create his own chronotopic categories with queer material in mind. This paper takes Bakhtin's general observation that genres contain inbuilt temporal logics and applies his categories to the primary texts, replacing the specifically queer temporal logics theorized by Freeman, Halberstam, Edelman, and Muñoz with Bakhtin's own categories, and seeing in each primary text its own constructed chronotope out of the raw material of chrononormative narrative convention.

Methodology

The research methodology used in this study is qualitative, close reading comparison method, the description of narratological method is qualitative and the analysis method is thematic. Five major texts were chosen that share three characteristics: (a) all the texts are works of fiction in the English language written by British authors spanning approximately a few generations from the high modern period, to the present day, to capture continuity and change over a span of about a hundred years; (b) each of the five texts foregrounds queer or

nonnormative gender and sexual identity as a central concern rather than as an incidental subplot; and (c) each of the five is formally distinctive in that it disrupts the chronology of the text, not just in minor or occasional ways, but in ways that operate at the level of the novel's overall architecture.

The five texts analysed are Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998), Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch* (2006) and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014). The analysis for each text focuses on three aspects: the dominant narratological device organizing temporal disruption, according to the typologies distinguished by Genette (1980): order, duration and frequency; the identity category/categories under stress by that disruption, be it gender, sexuality, or embodiment; and finally the theoretical concept from queer temporality studies that best explains the relation between form and identity in that text. This is a three-part schema which, summarized in Table 1, serves as the comparative structure for the analysis section that follows. Table 2 matches the theoretical concepts taken up in the literature review to their specific relevance when it comes to the interpretation of nonlinear identity over the corpus.

An important point to be noted in this study is that it is qualitative, interpretive, and not quantitative or corpus-linguistic. It is not a quantitative or corpus-linguistic study in which claims are made by measurement, but rather by textual evidence and theoretical synthesis. The five-text corpus, as well as texts and traditions outside of the framework that are discussed but not included in the corpus including those in the postcolonial Anglophone fiction, trans-authored fiction, and digital or hypertext narrative are not intended to be exhaustive nor are they necessarily those that would be considered suitable for future research.

Limitations

This design has a number of drawbacks. Firstly, to have restricted the corpus to British authors is useful for exploring the British literary tradition over time, but it excludes the vast canon of queer Anglophone fiction from Ireland, the United States, and the postcolonial world, which have also explored nonlinear form, albeit in different ways and at different times, and without any claim that British fiction holds any privileged relationship to queer temporality. Second, the choice criterion for selecting texts which have formally radical, novel-spanning temporal structures may be the very same that discounts queer fiction that achieves similar results through more localised or subtle temporal methods: free indirect discourse, tense shifts within otherwise linear plots. In particular, the close reading is necessarily selective, so that passages and features of the novels that best illustrate their relationship to chrononormativity are emphasized, and a different selection of evidence may have yielded a different emphasis, but not a different conclusion about the corpus's shared investment in nonlinear form, this paper argues.

Table 1

Comparative Overview of Temporal Structure Across the Primary Texts

Text Year	(Author,	Temporal Structure	Primary Device(s)	Identity Disrupted	Category
Woolf, (1928)	Orlando	Cyclical / extended lifespan (300+ years)	Achrony; biographical parody; anachronistic juxtaposition	Gender (male-to-female transformation)	
Winterson, the Cherry (1989)	Sexing	Braided dual-century timeline	Parallel narration; fairy-tale interpolation; temporal folding	Sexuality and bodily norms across eras	
Waters, The Night Watch (2006)		Reverse chronology (1947 → 1944 → 1941)	Retrograde plotting; delayed causality; analepsis-as- structure	Lesbian and queer wartime relationships	
Kay, Trumpet (1998)		Polyphonic, non-sequential testimony	Multiple narrators; achronic montage; posthumous framing	Transgender embodiment and kinship	
Smith, How to Be Both (2014)		Doubled/mirrored dual narrative (print-order varies)	Formal bifurcation; readerly nonlinearity; spectral address	Gender fluidity across historical periods	

Note. Temporal structures are classified using Genette's (1980) categories of narrative order and frequency.

Table 2

Key Theoretical Concepts and Their Application to Nonlinear Identity

Theoretical Concept	Source	Relevance to Nonlinear Identity
Chrononormativity	Freeman (2010)	Names the temporal scheduling of bodies toward marriage, reproduction, and inheritance against which queer narrative time pushes back
Queer time and place	Halberstam (2005)	Frames queerness as a rejection of the life-stage logic of family, longevity, and productivity
Backward-looking / feeling backward	Love (2007)	Validates narrative attachment to loss, shame, and the past rather than teleological progress
Death drive / anti-futurism	Edelman (2004)	Provides a counter-model in which queerness refuses reproductive futurism altogether
Queer utopian futurity	Muñoz (2009)	Offers a horizon-oriented temporality in tension with pure anti-futurism
Erotohistoriography	Freeman (2010)	Describes bodily, pleasurable engagement with historical time, relevant to Winterson's and Waters's sensory pasts
Narrative order, duration, frequency	Genette (1980)	Supplies the technical vocabulary (analepsis, anachrony) for describing nonlinear plotting

Note. Concepts are drawn from the queer temporality and narratology literature reviewed above.

Analysis: Temporal Disruption Across Five Texts

The five readings that follow are organized chronologically by publication date, allowing the analysis to track both continuity and change in how English fiction has queered narrative time across roughly ninety years. Each subsection first identifies the text's dominant narratological device before turning to the identity category that device places under pressure and the theoretical framework best suited to explaining the relationship between the two.

Cyclical Extension and Achrony: Woolf's Orlando

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) is perhaps the most emblematic text of queer temporal disruption in modern English fiction, not least because it announces its temporal project in its subtitle, *A Biography*, even as it violates every convention of biographical time. Orlando lives across more than three centuries, aging only decades, and midway through the novel changes sex from man to woman without narrative or medical explanation. Woolf's narrator repeatedly draws attention to the discrepancy between clock time and lived time, famously observing that an hour, once lodged in the queer element of the human spirit, can stretch to fifty or a hundred times its clock length. This is achrony in Genette's (1980) sense taken to its structural extreme: the novel's duration bears almost no stable relationship to the chronological time it purports to cover.

Read through Freeman's (2010) chrononormativity, Orlando's refusal of aging and its casual traversal of gender categories together denaturalize the developmental schedule childhood, courtship, marriage, motherhood that organizes conventional biography and, by extension, conventional femininity. Orlando's gender transformation is narrated not as crisis or trauma but as continuous identity: "Orlando had become a woman there

is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been." The novel thus uses temporal elasticity to stage what Halberstam (2005) would later theorize as queer time's refusal of the life stages that bind gender identity to biological milestones. Boone's (1998) account of modernist formal experimentation as bound up with sexual nonconformity is directly relevant here: Woolf's playful violation of biographical convention is inseparable from her (and Orlando's, and Vita Sackville-West's, the novel's dedicatee and inspiration) resistance to normative categories of gender and desire.

It is worth pausing on the novel's mock-biographical apparatus its preface, index, and photographic "illustrations" purporting to document Orlando at various ages because this apparatus stages a direct parody of chrononormative documentation itself. Biography as a genre depends on the reader's trust that a subject's recorded life follows the expected sequence of birth, development, and death; Woolf's insistent citation of biographical convention, even as she violates its most basic premises, makes visible the arbitrariness of the schedule such conventions typically naturalize. Kermode's (1967) account of narrative closure as a fictive device imposed on the "middle" of a life is relevant here in reverse: Orlando has no clear middle, no single climax toward which its three centuries build, and Woolf's refusal to supply one is itself the novel's argument that gendered biographical time is a convention rather than a natural fact.

Braided Dual-Century Narration: Winterson's Sexing the Cherry

In *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), Jeanette Winterson intertwines two parallel temporal stories: one in the seventeenth century, concerning Dog-Woman, a giantess, and her foundling son Jordan, and another loosely parallel twentieth century one that features environmental disaster and fluid genders as if they were reincarnations or echoes of the earlier pair. The book does not resolve the question of which chronology is the "main" one; rather it weaves the two into one another, and also interpolates fairy-tale elements that further complicate linear causality.

This braiding is an expression of the "erotohistoriography" of Freeman (2010), which describes a desirous relation with the past, a relation that does not claim to have finalized or completed history, but rather one that is felt and re-enacted in the present. This gender-fluid twentieth century narrator who talks about living "backwards" with regard to the normativity of being a woman is a clear example of nonnormative gender identity as temporal dissidence. Dinshaw's (1999) model of "touching across time" between subjects of different ages provides a clear vocabulary for the model of the novel's most central formal gesture: the affective reaching across the gap between past and present, between characters from different centuries, that refuses the idea that queerness is a new phenomenon lacking in purchase on the history of the past.

These fairy-tale episodes are repeated throughout the novel: a retelling of the tale of the twelve dancing princesses, in which the princesses tell of lives lived around female desire instead of the rescuing prince, which the story's traditional ending requires. These are not strictly speaking part of either century's story, but rather serve as allegorical commentaries, "external analepses" that are not part of either narrative's main action, as Genette (1980) would term them. Winterson's practice of breaking her already braided historical narrative into something from a completely different order of time (mythic or fairy-tale time, not claiming a historical location at all), reinforces the novel's overall argument that queer desire is more extensive than any one time can house.

Reverse Chronology: Waters's The Night Watch

Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch* (2006) takes the most structurally severe approach to nonlinearity in this corpus: the novel is organized in three parts moving backward through 1947, 1944, and 1941, so that readers encounter the damaged, guarded adult relationships of its lesbian and gay characters before learning the wartime causes of that damage. This is sustained analepsis-as-structure rather than the occasional flashback Genette (1980) treats as a local device; the entire novel's macro-order is retrograde. The effect, read through Love's (2007) "feeling backward," is to resist the redemptive, forward-moving arc that mainstream historical fiction often imposes on queer wartime narratives, in which suffering is narrated as a stage overcome en route to present-day liberation. By moving backward, Waters instead insists that the reader dwell in the characters' present-tense damage before being granted the causal comfort of explanation, formally enacting the way trauma and loss persist nonlinearly in queer lives rather than resolving into forward progress. The novel's title itself, with its suggestion of watching over a threatened present, underscores that its temporal politics are about vigilant attention to the past's ongoing presence rather than its pastness.

Waters's reverse structure also has a specifically generic effect worth noting: it borrows the investigative logic of detective fiction, in which a present-tense mystery (why are these characters so guarded, damaged, and estranged from one another in 1947?) is gradually solved by uncovering earlier causes, while withholding detective fiction's usual reassurance that uncovering the past will resolve the present. By 1941, the novel's earliest and final section, readers understand the wartime causes of the characters' later unhappiness, but Waters declines to loop back and show any subsequent improvement; the novel simply ends in the past, its characters' future damage already known but formally unrevisited. This refusal to return to the "present" of 1947 after explaining it enacts, at the structural level, Edelman's (2004) resistance to redemptive futurity: the novel offers understanding without

offering progress.

Polyphonic Testimony: Kay's Trumpet

Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998), loosely inspired by the life of jazz musician Billy Tipton, is narrated by a rotating cast of voices: the deceased trans musician Joss Moody's widow, his adopted son, a journalist, a funeral director, a doctor whose testimonies do not appear in chronological sequence but in an achronic montage assembled after Joss's death, when his birth-assigned sex becomes public. No single narrator, including Joss himself, is granted a continuous or authoritative timeline; identity is instead reconstructed retrospectively and partially, from fragments.

This polyphonic structure enacts, at the level of form, the novel's central argument about trans identity and narrative authority: just as Joss's gender cannot be reduced to a single "revelatory" fact disclosed at one point in linear time, his life story cannot be told from one position or in one sequence. Stockton's (2009) notion of identity moving "sideways" rather than developing along a single vertical timeline resonates strongly with Kay's structure, in which Joss's son Colman's grief-stricken, achronic recollections refuse to cohere into the tidy "coming out" or "discovery" narrative that tabloid journalism within the novel tries to impose on his father's life.

Kay's structure additionally exploits what Genette (1980) calls narrative frequency: the same core event—the discovery of Joss's assigned-female body at death—is narrated repeatedly from different witnesses' perspectives, each repetition adding emotional and interpretive nuance rather than new plot information. This repetitive, iterative narration formally enacts the way trans lives are frequently subjected to repeated, non-consensual re-narration by others (doctors, journalists, funeral directors) even as, or especially because, the subject who could authoritatively narrate his own life is no longer present to do so. The absence of Joss's own first-person retrospective account, present only in fragments of memory recalled by others, further underscores Kay's refusal to grant retrospective narrative authority the kind of unified, linear form that a conventional biography or memoir would supply.

Formal Doubling: Smith's How to Be Both

Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014) is printed in two different orderings: some copies open with the fifteenth-century, gender-ambiguous painter Francescho del Cossa's narrative, others with the contemporary teenager George's so that no two readers necessarily encounter the same chronology. Within each half, time also loops and doubles: Francescho's spectral consciousness observes George's present from a position outside linear history, while George's grief for her dead mother repeatedly folds the past into her present perception.

This bibliographic doubling operationalizes Muñoz's (2009) queer futurity and Ahmed's (2006) disorientation simultaneously: the novel refuses to fix a single "correct" temporal order for understanding gender-nonconforming identity across five centuries, instead insisting that queerness be read both backward and forward, with no privileged origin point. Francescho's own gender presentation, understood differently in Renaissance Ferrara than it would be today, resists anachronistic translation into contemporary identity categories even as the novel insists on affective continuity between the two eras—a tension precisely captured by Dinshaw's (1999) caution that touching across time must acknowledge difference even as it seeks connection.

Discussion

Read together, these five texts suggest that nonlinear narrative form in modern English fiction is not a uniform technique but a repertoire of related strategies: cyclical extension, braiding, reversal, polyphony, doubling that share a common function: unsettling the chrononormative schedule that organizes gendered and sexual selfhood into legible, forward-moving biography. Figure 1 represents this shared function schematically, contrasting the milestone-based, arrow-like structure of chrononormative time with the looping, repeating, anachronistic structure that Freeman (2010) and Halberstam (2005) associate with queer time. Figure 2 maps the five texts' specific narrative-time structures onto this same comparative logic, showing how each novel translates the theoretical concept of queer time into a distinct formal device.



Figure 1. Chrononormative versus queer time.

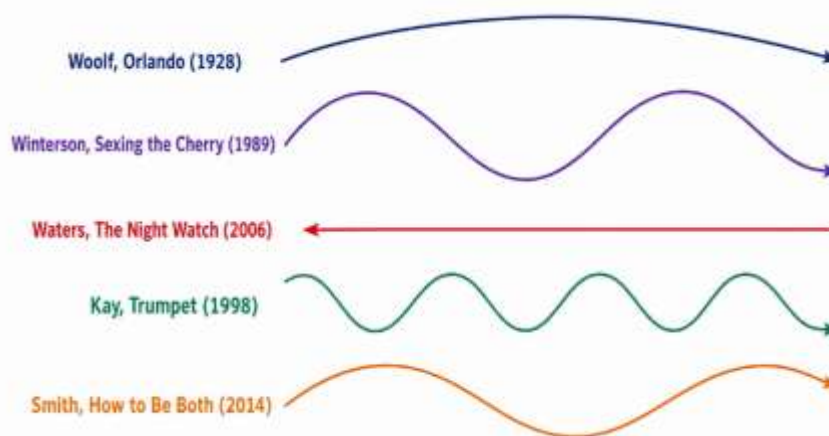


Figure 2. Narrative-time structures across the five primary texts.

Several patterns emerge from the comparative analysis. First, the severity of formal disruption appears loosely correlated with the degree to which a text centers embodiment and physical transition as opposed to relational or affective queerness: Woolf's and Kay's texts, which foreground bodily transformation and trans identity respectively, adopt the most radical departures from chronology (achronic biography, posthumous polyphony), while Waters's text, more centrally concerned with relationships between already-formed lesbian and gay subjects, adopts a more classically narratological device sustained reverse chronology that remains legible as a sequence, only inverted. This pattern suggests that the relationship between formal radicalism and thematic content is not incidental but responsive: the more a text must represent identity categories themselves as unstable or emergent, the more it strains against inherited narrative sequence.

Second, the corpus reveals a productive tension between Edelman's (2004) anti-futurism and Muñoz's (2009) utopian futurity that maps onto differences between the texts. Waters's backward-moving structure and Kay's posthumous polyphony both resist redemptive, future-oriented narratives of queer progress, aligning more closely with Edelman's and Love's (2007) skepticism toward forward-looking teleology. Smith's doubled structure, by contrast, insists on an open future in which multiple orderings and multiple readers remain possible, resonating with Muñoz's insistence on queerness as an incompleteness oriented toward a "not-yet." Woolf's and Winterson's texts occupy a middle position, using cyclical and braided structures that neither foreclose nor guarantee a redemptive future but instead multiply the presents available to their characters.

Third, Puar's (2007) caution against treating nonlinear or alternative temporalities as automatically liberatory is worth heeding even within this literary corpus. Several of these novels particularly *Orlando*, with its imperial and orientalist episodes, and *How to Be Both*, with its careful but still selective use of a historical Italian painter deploy nonlinear form in ways that are not straightforwardly progressive with respect to race, empire, or class, even as they are formally innovative with respect to gender and sexuality. A fuller account of queering time in English fiction would need to attend to these intersections more closely than space here allows.

Finally, the analysis suggests a methodological payoff for combining narratology and queer theory: Genette's (1980) technical vocabulary allows the precise identification of where and how a text departs from

Queering Time: Temporal Disruptions and Nonlinear Identity in Modern English Fiction...

chronological order, while Freeman's, Halberstam's, Edelman's, and Muñoz's frameworks explain why those departures matter thematically and politically. Neither field alone fully accounts for the phenomenon this paper calls "queering time": narratology without queer theory risks treating nonlinearity as purely formal play, while queer theory without narratology risks discussing temporality only abstractly, without grounding claims in the technical specifics of how a given novel is actually put together.

A final observation concerns readerly experience. Each of these five novels places unusual temporal demands on its reader: *Orlando* requires readers to hold three centuries of change in mind as continuous with a single consciousness; *Sexing the Cherry* requires readers to track two braided timelines without a stable anchor for which is "primary"; *The Night Watch* requires readers to defer causal understanding for the length of an entire novel; *Trumpet* requires readers to assemble a coherent portrait from testimony that arrives in no fixed order; and *How to Be Both*, in its most literal formal gesture, makes the reader's own encounter with the text which half they read first part of the novel's meaning. Currie's (2007) account of how fiction can manipulate readerly tense and retrospection to produce effects unavailable in ordinary temporal experience helps explain why these formal demands are not incidental difficulty but constitutive of each novel's meaning: the reader is asked to inhabit, however briefly, a relationship to time that does not run on chrononormative rails, and that experience of readerly disorientation is itself part of how these novels argue for the validity of queer temporal experience.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that modern English fiction concerned with queer identity repeatedly turns to nonlinear narrative form cyclical extension, braided timelines, reverse chronology, polyphonic testimony, and formal doubling as a representational strategy adequate to identities that resist the chrononormative schedule of linear development. Across Woolf's *Orlando*, Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*, Waters's *The Night Watch*, Kay's *Trumpet*, and Smith's *How to Be Both*, temporal disruption is shown to be inseparable from the representation of gender and sexual nonconformity: form and content are mutually constitutive rather than merely aligned.

The comparative framework developed here summarized in Tables 1 and 2 and visualized in Figures 1 and 2 offers a model that future scholarship might extend to other bodies of Anglophone fiction, including postcolonial, diasporic, and trans-authored writing in which questions of nonlinear time intersect with additional axes of historical rupture, such as colonization, migration, and diaspora. Future research might also productively extend this framework to film, television, and digital or hypertext narrative, media in which nonlinear and interactive structures raise related but distinct questions about the relationship between form and queer temporality.

There are also pedagogical implications worth noting briefly. Teaching these five novels alongside their theoretical counterparts pairing *Orlando* with Freeman (2010), *Trumpet* with Stockton (2009), or *How to Be Both* with Muñoz (2009) offers a way of making abstract queer theory concrete through close attention to literary form, and, conversely, of showing students that formal literary analysis is never merely technical but always already bound up with questions of politics, embodiment, and identity. A syllabus organized around "queering time" might also usefully include nineteenth-century precedents the achronic, retrospective structures of some Gothic and sensation fiction, for instance to test whether this paper's claims about the specifically modern conjunction of nonlinear form and queer content hold for earlier periods as well, or whether something changes once writers have explicit access to twentieth- and twenty-first-century vocabularies of queerness.

What this paper's five-text corpus suggests, at minimum, is that when modern English fiction sets out to queer identity, it very often first queers time. Chronology, in these novels, is not a neutral container for queer content but itself one of the normative structures that queer writing must contend with, rework, or refuse. Attending closely to how these novels tell time, this paper has argued, is inseparable from attending to what they have to say about gender, sexuality, and the possibility of living and narrating a life outside the schedule..

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