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# Liminal Horizons

## Time in Contemporary Queer Fiction

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*"Queerness's ecstatic and horizonal temporality is a path […] to a greater openness to the world"*

(Muñoz 25)

In his essay *Queerness as a Horizon*, Muñoz defines the act of queering time as "stepping out of the linearity of straight time" (25) which limits the queer experience by constraining it to the lacking, oppressive space of *the present* preventing access to the heteronormatively conditioned space *of the future*. Recognising the inclusion of — and adherence to — the existing, flawed order is not sufficient. Instead, Muñoz proposes seeing queerness as a utopian notion of something not-yet-there, towards which we can strive. Thus, as he notes, "queerness's ecstatic and horizonal temporality is a path […] to a greater openness to the world" (25). Echoing Muñoz's vision, contemporary LGBTQ fiction departs from chronological and traditional depictions of time in order to escape the "poisonous and insolvent" (30) present. In this essay, I will explore said departure by considering the novels *Hurricane Season* and *LOTE*, as well as the short stories *The Englishman* and *Paul's Case* to illustrate the subversion and narrative *queering* of time. In doing so, I will look at the ways authors mirror and highlight the individual and communal experience of LGBT communities regarding violence, oppression, erasure, indifference, racism, class struggle and loss, as seen in context of straight time.

I.

In *Hurricane Season*, Melchor tells an intricate story of violence, oppression and suffering centred on a single Mexican town. At the very beginning of the novel the reader is told that the Witch — a half-mystical figure who turns out to be a transgender woman — is dead. The ambiguous event is located in the present tense, with the first chapters slowly unspooling into the history of the Witch's family as told by the collective population of the town, blending realism with folklore and rumour. As the novel progresses, instead of proceeding chronologically along with the plot, we travel back in time, following the intricately woven, converging narrative. Multiple

characters relay their subjective memories and experiences to ultimately shed light on the same story: the violent murder of the Witch and the gruelling circumstances leading up to it. This retroactive, a-chronological retracing serves multiple purposes. First, we are faced with the juxtaposition of personal versus communal "memory" of an event, and the resulting differences in its perception. Secondly, the characters are presented with two purposes of accessing the past and future, aligning with Muñoz's dissatisfaction with the present: as ways of justifying the present (behaviour) and escaping the present (reality).

In Melchor's novel, the individual experience of memory and *the past* is merely a fraction of an ever-present communal experience. The very opening sequence of the novel presents the reader with a narrative mirroring the spreading of "news" in a community, void of an easily definable narrator and subject to speculation and ambiguity, converging the present event of the Witch's murder with years of preceding stories surrounding both her and the community she grew up in.

> Everyone knew about the sounds that came from inside there, the moaning and wailing that carried all the way to the dirt track, which, in their minds, was the sound of two witches fornicating with the devil (…). (13)

This stylisation and blurring of past/present not only influences the separate narratives of each subsequent character by shaping their viewpoints — what "everyone" perceives becomes coloured with shared speculation, affecting the community's core assumptions — but also lends itself to the mythologisation of both victims and the behaviour towards them. The mythos surrounding the Witch — a medley of pre-existing tales and folklore — shows the eagerness of the witness/individual to dehumanise her and exclude from their own structures of morality and suffering. The events regarding her person become one blurred experience of the Other:

> those kids didn't know her as the Young Witch but simply as the Witch, and in their ignorance and youth they […] attributed to her […] all those bloodcurdling stories that the townswomen used to tell them when they were kids (17).

and hence both — in Kristeva's terms — "*abject"* (*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 2), and borderline fictitious; mythological and distant. And it is this distance, locating the Witch in a sphere removed from straight time, and shunning her to represent an incomprehensible past, that is aimed to *excuse* the present violence towards her. The past is re-accessed to justify the rejection from a preceding cultural context: having committed the murder, Brando, a young man struggling with his own identity, sees himself "stained" by the crime, yet instead of accepting his fault, he locates it in his visions of the devil possessing him. Later, in jail, he observes his inmates participate in a facsimile of *danse macabre*, explaining their violence on the presence of "the enemy" or the devil, and calling themselves his "servants" (113). Complimentarily, while driving the perpetrators away from the crime scene, wilfully ignorant of being complicit in murder, Munra, an ordinary man indifferent to the atrocities committed in his community, turns to God — and so, the tradition of seeking a future in the afterlife succeeding existence on Earth — in an attempt to absolve himself:

> Protect me, God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, You are my Lord, and a sudden gust of […] unrelenting wind […] and in the distance, high in the sky, a great cloud veiled the sun and a lightning bolt struck the outlying mountains without a sound, not even a snap as it parted that tree clean. (51)

Accordingly, the injustice of the indifference regarding the Witch's murder culminates with a section where, paralleling her death to the Biblical depiction of the death of Jesus, she seeks her retribution in the potential future.

The dialectics of personal and communal memory as relating to the queer experience remain a core theme of *Hurricane Season*. Each of the characters related directly or tangentially to the central story has access to merely a fragment of a whole — or, more accurately, focuses only on what pertains to their own narrative. Muñoz posits a thesis that queerness does not exist "quite here" in the limiting present, but rather remains what Agamben calls a *potentiality* (21) that can be sought. Accordingly, Brando is so fixated on the memory of his life-altering sexual encounter with Luismi and its potentially catastrophic effects — "the memory of which tormented him so mercilessly he wanted to pull out his own brain; and he couldn't stop wondering who knew their secret" (Melchor, 136) — that in his dwelling on the potential escape and actualisation of his own queered future, he sacrifices the lives he considers less essential — *Other* — than his own: "Kill the freak and leave that dumb fuck Munra in it, and then he and Luismi would be out of there, […] long gone, far from Villa, far from everything they knew" (105). This example unveils the mechanism of desensitisation in the relation between "I" and the Other, seen as someone embodying that which is *abjected* from the self — repressed, unacceptable, and yet unavoidable and recurring (McAfee, 46). In Brando's case, this pertains to his rejection of the Witch who personifies his own rejected queerness. Following Muñoz's invocation of Agamben, we can relate Brando's resulting attitude to the concept of *homo sacer* — derived from Roman law, describing someone constitutionally defined as inferior, who can be killed by anybody (*Homo Sacer*, 47). In *Hurricane Season*, this is shown in the treatment of the marginalised queer, homosexual and transgender members of society — more specifically, those who either cannot pass as heteronormative or reject the submission to the faulty social order of the present. The perceived transgression of such "utopian" approach to existence is used to justify the violence directed towards them and absolve those inflicting it of guilt. The

notion, as Melchor suggests, is a trap: in the end, Brando's self-serving, desperate compliance with the rules of the heteronormative present proves fatal.

Finally, the last aspect of the parallels of the constraining *straight time* with violence and justice is the posthumous respect reluctantly given back to the Witch by the — also marginalised — female sex workers that sought her help while she lived: "and, when all's said and done, a shame, goddammit, because deep down she was a good egg, always helping them out" (19). And indeed, the ultimate paradox of *Hurricane Season* is its ending as, though desperate to remove themselves from the accountability and constraints of reality, the characters remain stuck in the indefinite purgatory of the present moment: a cluster of inter-connected suffering without a clear pathway out. In the novel's penultimate section, once again narrated by the townsfolk and mythologised through the anaphoric incantation "they say," (115) the present/future generations are thus told to "[…] respect the dead silence of that house, the pain of the miserable souls who once lived there" (116), thus poignantly echoing Muñoz's invocation of "a queerness to come, a way of being in the world that is glimpsed through reveries in a quotidian life that challenges the dominance of an affective world, a present, full of anxiousness and fear" (25)." The only solution to escape the misery of the present is to embrace the active "becoming" of future generations.

II.

To contrast the asynchronous constellation of viewpoints sprawling across *Hurricane Season*, let us now analyse two works of short fiction: Stuart's *The Englishman* and Cather's *Paul's Case* and the ways in which they engage with chronological time. The stories are set in England and America respectively, short of a hundred years apart, and ostensibly follow a chronological order of events. However, the concept of time is subverted in each: surface linear time is suspended, with

narrative attention focused directly on the specific, "present" period strictly relevant to the story. In *The Englishman*, David, the protagonist, travels to London to spend a summer with William, who hires him for ambiguous "work" which later turns out to entail a sexual relationship with the host. As in the case of Baldwin's defining work *Giovanni's Room*, the short story depicts one summer as the plot's timeframe, centred on a pivotal encounter between two men. The genre's narrow scope makes it impossible to elaborate on the details of either David or the Englishman's past, making the use of the retrospection and allusions to the past and present even more striking. One of the prevalent themes laced throughout the story is William's obsessive taking and hoarding of photographs: both of David, often taken while he "felt out of place" (Stuart, 7) and, similarly, of a number of young men preceding David: "Each page held a collection of photographs […] of young men, maybe twenty to thirty different faces. William had organized them as though they were chapters in his life; they were laid out thoughtfully, boy by boy" (6). This motif of recurrence — repeated past versions of the same event culminating in the current and simultaneously predicting the pattern to continue — mirrors the similarity of experience of queer people of different backgrounds. The allusions to the past are characterised by specific types of loss: in the case of William, it is the obscure allusion to AIDS through the mention of his past partner who "got sick" (9); while David's love "married [his] sister" (8). In each case, this loss can be attributed to an experience prevalent in LGBT communities throughout their history, highlighting both the common injustice and it's chronological precedent.

Yet even between the two characters, there exists a hierarchy: the Englishman exploits David's background and dependence on money to attempt to manipulate him into a relationship. The story begins with a particular case of memory as a narrative device, the scent of William's skin invoking something from the past: "the Englishman reminded me of my mother's lemons" (1). Such use of what Kristeva defines as "sensory experience underlying involuntary memory" (*Proust and*

*the Sense of Time*, 30) has been brought forward by Proust with his madeleine cake (60). In *The Englishman,* it defines a specific role of time and chronology: however grounded the story is in the present moment, it is nevertheless impossible to fully distinguish it from the past, and the preceding, communal queer experience. In Stuart's story, David's age, background and class place him lower in social hierarchy than the wealthy William and introduce an imbalance of position in a relationship between two marginalised people. Combined with the aforementioned theme of recurrence, this is essential to the wider treatment of class struggle and exploitation faced by the LGBT youth worldwide. In wanting to escape the reality of deprivation and inability to "be himself" or have fulfilling relationships, David would have to compromise his freedom and independence. By turning down William's offer, he rejects the compromise, but remains stranded in the present — while, as he himself states, "[a]ll I wanted was a summer in which to be myself" (2).

This motif of class and sexuality is explored complementarily in *Paul's Case*. As in *The Englishman*, the story "freezes time" focusing on an even shorter span of a few days during which the titular Paul lives out a carefully constructed vision of a life he craves but knows to be impossible to achieve. In order to access it, he is forced to resort to a number of schemes, theft and fraud — but in the end, achieves what Stuart's David didn't: "he […] felt so at peace with himself. The mere release from the necessity of petty lying, lying every day and every day, restored his self-respect" (Cather, 148). Up until this point, Paul claims to have lived his life "tormented by fear […]. Until now, he could not remember a time when he had not been dreading something" (145).

And in this desperately secured false life alone did Paul feel at peace with his own identity. Yet parallel to *The Englishman,* Cather highlights the protagonist inability to live a genuine life in an oppressively heteronormative society for a lasting period of time. Paul's time to "be himself" is short-lived. As he states, "[i]t was a losing game in the end […] this revolt against the homilies by

which the world is run" (150). As David surrenders his vision of independence by reverting to an old pattern, Paul resorts to committing suicide at the brink of being deprived of this idealised existence. By doing so, he subverts the chronological progression of time by preserving himself in the perpetual present, stopping time — at the cost of own life. This extreme act of self-control over one's own story brings me to the last section of the essay, and *LOTE*.

## III.

Bradbury and Macfarlane define Modernism as the "dis-establishing of communal reality […], destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character […] when all realities have become subjective fiction" (27). In *LOTE*, Shola von Reinhold re-invents the modernist tradition through the co-existence of past and present in a seamless frame narrative, combining the story of Mathilda, a young Black woman studying her "Transfixions" — niche historical figures and objects of her fascination— with the parallel, retraced story of the Transfixions themselves. Though ostensibly chronological, Mathilda's story is delivered in a hypnotic, almost oneiric narration: the events of her life seem to follow a dream logic, as though guided towards her fate by the ghosts of the people whose lives she unveils. Incited by her fixation with Hermia Druitt, "the Black Princess", and her surrounding camaraderie of Bright Young Things, Mathilda travels from London to a European town of Dun. Here, she slowly traces the history and testimonials of Hermia's life and subsequently discovers and revives "LOTE", a mystical bohemian society based on the mythical Lotus-eaters celebrating beauty and aesthetics. All the while, she follows the "story within a story" — *Black Modernisms*, a book re-tracing figures of lost Black literary history to save it from oblivion. Much like Woolf's *Orlando*, where the main character undergoes a reinvention of personality, gender and identity while moving through time,

von Reinhold's story is a narrative of transfiguration and self-creation. It explores two ways of engaging with time: first, by challenging the ways records of Black and queer past are erased and stifled in the Western society; and second, through the characters' control of their own past and the *potential* future in relation to self-definition.

Throughout her search of Hermia, Mathilda encounters multiple instances of mishandled, lost evidence, which is persistently ascribed to chance by the white people managing them. Nevertheless, it gradually becomes clear that the process of obscuring — or *erasure* — is intentional rather than subject to fate. Agnes, one of Mathilda's co-workers at the archive, is accused of conspiracy by drawing attention to the fact:

> "You make it sound like there's a shadowy cabal specifically suppressing Black art in Europe."
> "Mathilda, there doesn't need to be. […] There was a time I believed in something much more like a conspiracy—a network of people actively suppressing information about Black European culture, because I couldn't explain why certain paintings were just sitting in archives or going missing." (421)

As Mathilda notes, "[t]he prospect of Hermia being 'made up' had awoken me to the possibility of the opposite: that not only was Hermia real, considerable efforts had been made at blanching her from history; unmaking her" (363). This process of erasure is, subsequently, defied in the novel as the protagonists who — along with their research about the lives of LOTE members — bring the society back to life by participating in its tradition and performing the roles of the preceding members. Through this retrieval and reclaiming of the past, *LOTE*'s characters actively become Muñoz's future generation, "not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and

now" (28). And indeed, von Reinhold explores the concept of erasure from two contrasting points of view: oppressive, external erasure aiming to deny certain histories the right to be documented, and the wilful erasure of one's *own* past selves as an act of self-creation and finding one's own identity.

Mathilda, Erskine-Lily and Malachi all undergo so-called "Escapes": rejecting their past identity and connections entirely in order to progress. This process can be considered an act of reclaiming the erasure of the past through volition: deciding which parts to embrace. As opposed to Cather and Stuart's protagonists, Mathilda and her friends deny the lasting impact of the past on their current self. The pre-existing selves are "archived" and filed away as private and inaccessible. Indeed, the accidental re-discovery of a past Escape can be seen as disastrous, as in the case of Erskine-Lily, whose old name is revealed to Mathilda, thus making her, "[…] helplessly treacherous. That image of old self was death. All who contained it were deadly" (454). Erskine-Lily's example is particularly acute, as it ties also to their journey of gender-expression throughout the novel, which entails the change of the pronouns "he/him" used throughout the first (past) sections of the book to (them/their) as Erskine-Lily moves towards further self-understanding and another Escape at the end of the narrative.

This act of self-definition brings us to the ongoing, deeper aspect of self-creation in *LOTE*, especially in the context of self-mythologisation. Throughout the narrative, told primarily in first person and from Mathilda's point of view, there appear to be sections in third person drawn either from *Black Modernisms* or another narrative, the name of it blotted out with black — Hermia Druitt's story. The tense in these fragments is even more inconsistent, mirroring the Modernist scattered storytelling:

"Next year in Dun—

The letter was from England

*Dear Hermia,*

*You shall never escape.*

Presently at Sands House—" (325).

In many ways, Hermia's experience, though often exacerbated in accordance with the difficult conditions of the time period, mirrors Mathilda's directly — for instance, facing the threat of the past catching up with her — "you shall never escape" (325). But Hermia, too, undergoes an Escape: through her belonging to the Lote-Os society and renaming herself Arke — drawn from mythology, Iris's rainbow-winged "twin […] who rebelled and went to serve the titans" (148). This parallel delves deeper as Mathilda ultimately becomes a reincarnation of Hermia. In the section preceding the re-creation of the LOTE ritual, the person of narration shifts, now telling Mathilda and Erskine-Lily's story as though it were a direct continuation of Hermia's. Having previously called Erskine-Lily a "living Transfixion" (313) Mathilda predicts that in the end, it is them who will become part of the history they study, in the third aspect of time — the future. Blending the past with the present, she finally reappears as Hermia in the closing section of the novel, only to encounter an ambiguous figure whose name is "so similar" (458) to hers, and who can be interpreted as an "Escaped" Erskine-Lily. The mythical transformation — and journey of both self-discovery and reclaiming the past/identity is complete.

In his essay, Muñoz states that "[s]eeing queerness as horizon rescues and emboldens concepts such as freedom that have been withered by the touch of neoliberal thought and gay

assimilationist politics" (14). While *Hurricane Season* can be interpreted as a warning against the allegiance to the limiting present and distance of the past, where an escape into potentiality is sought but never realised, *Paul's Case* and *The Englishman* explore the precedence of queer history as a past which can be revisited, and the question of volition when faced with the impossibility of accessing the future. LOTE, finally, brings these concepts together, suggesting a way to both reclaim the past — as an archive of queer experience and the self — and actively move towards accessing the queer future. Thus, in the analysis of the four texts, we observe contemporary LGBT authors utilising the literary departure from *straight time* as what Muñoz defines as generationally "becoming" queer — actively seeking the future of the potential, progressively less oppressed identity and experience.

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